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Contrast

CONTRAST:

A Story of Two Women.

BY

LADY ———

IN THREE PARTS.

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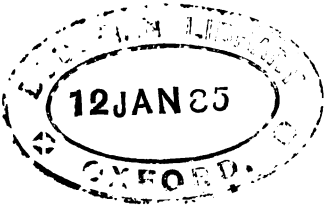
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THE STORY OF AGNES

(CONTINUED).

CHAPTER I.

ON a bright sunny morning in September the Beresfords arrived in Dresden. The cousins were delighted to see each other, and Agnes was struck with the high-bred manner of Francis Estcourt, who met them at the station. He had heard rumours of her haughty intractable nature, and with his knowledge of Lionel, he was curious to know how such apparently incongruous elements would blend in a *ménage*. Agnes, however, was extremely gracious in her manner, and at once accepted his invitation to dinner for the same afternoon.

On leaving the station, she drove straight with Lionel to their hotel, thankful that the Estcourts had not proposed to lodge them, and firm in her determination to resist Francis Estcourt's hospitable proposal, that while merely sleeping at the hotel, they should make his house their home. She felt bound on this first day to accept his invitation to dinner, but she would not become intimate with the American wife, would not be lionized by her, nor yield up her own liberty in any way. Having heard so much of the inferior sort of Americans, she could picture the Yankee and her surroundings; a handsome, showy woman, with a loud metallic voice; good-natured doubtless, but vulgar, noisy, free-and-easy in manner, and possibly coarse in speech, pushing herself into familiarity with her English cousins. So much for the wife, while as for the surroundings, she could easily bring them before her mind's eye. The apartment, gilded and garish, bedecked like its mistress, and crammed with incongruous, cheap, tawdry decorations, for on this point Lionel had been mistaken; he had remembered afterwards that the Estcourts were poor. The dinners, the lun-

cheons, how vividly Agnes's imagination portrayed them; lengthy, pretentious, ill-cooked; servants hired for the occasion; everything for show and for showing off! She would never be able to endure it. She would be civil, of course, but would make Mrs. Estcourt understand that her days must, at any rate, be her own; and, again, her imagination stepped in, and represented to her the ringing twang of the American voice, as she would stand to do the honours of the glorious pictures, the grand colouring of a Titian, the tender beauty of a Raphael.

Lionel's return interrupted her reveries; he was radiant, delighted with Estcourt, and prepared to be delighted with that Yankee, with "no nonsense about her." And, as his spirits rose to fever-heat, those of Agnes sank to zero. However, the ordeal must be faced, and she went to dress, putting on the simplest of gowns, determined even in this to mark her distaste for Yankee fashions. Lionel's exuberant excitement overpowered her during the short drive, and her own good resolutions were making to themselves wings, as she prepared to encounter her dreaded hostess.

CHAPTER II.

AS they drew up at the porch, and found the house door hospitably open to receive them, a flood of sunshine poured into the entrance hall, and shed a bright light upon a figure which stood out in strong relief from the dim background. Framed by an inner door of dark-coloured wood, curtained with a heavy, sombre material, it seemed as if a portrait endowed with life had stepped down from its canvas. It bore the semblance of a fair maiden in Puritan garb, of a soft ingenuous face, eyes of clearest hazel, small, delicate features, complexion the tint of purest ivory, crowning a graceful form just above the middle height. So far it might have been indeed a portrait painted by a skilful hand; but no human artist could have rendered the expression, the soul shining through those transparent eyes, tell-

ing of the goodness, purity, and truth within. It needed not the smile which illumined the countenance, nor the faint pink colour as of a wild rose which suffused the cheek, to prove that this was no picture, but the living reality of Ruth Estcourt, who now came forward to welcome her guests. In primitive fashion she kissed the astonished Agnes on either cheek, uttering in low, sweet accents the quaint greeting,

"Welcome, dear lady, welcome; it gives me sincere pleasure to make thine acquaintance. We trust thou wilt be friendly to us, as being thy kinsfolk. And thou, too, art welcome," she said, turning and giving her hand to Lionel.

For the first few minutes Agnes remained mute with astonishment; a sense of self-reproach for her previous prejudice mingling with the dawning interest with which Ruth already inspired her. The contrast between her own ideal and the reality, between the flashy, fussy, over-dressed woman of her conception, and the gentle, winning creature who stood before her, reduced her to silence; but soon recovering her presence of mind, Agnes warmly returned the greeting.

"We will not trouble thee to come up-stairs," said Ruth, after divesting Agnes of her wraps; "our simple meal must now be ready." And so saying, she led the way to the dining-room.

In one sense Agnes's surmises were correct. The grandest preparations had been made by the hospitable Quakeress, assisted by her faithful old servant, Miriam, for the entertainment of the guests. The little apartment, always spotlessly clean, had, nevertheless, been subjected to extra scrubbings; the dainty muslin curtains were tied back with pale blue ribbons, which matched with the chintzes and harmonised well with the cream tint of the wall paper. Two or three choice pictures collected in his travels by Estcourt, who, himself something of an artist, could appreciate what was excellent of its kind; a fine antique German clock; certain relics from the far-off Western home; a few bunches of prairie grass, and some Bohemian glasses filled with fragrant flowers—these completed the simple ornamentation. Ruth had not acquired the modern taste for filling her room with rickety, spindle-legged tables, and loading them with useless gimcracks; all was

orderly and fresh, suggesting peace, repose, and comfort. The cosy corner by the fire—for their sitting-room boasted of an open grate—was occupied by an American rocking chair, evidently reserved for the master of the establishment, while a low seat in close proximity betokened the accustomed place of his wife. By the side of Estcourt's chair stood a solid old-fashioned table covered with newspapers and magazines; a bookcase well filled; a wicker table containing materials for work and small garments in process of manufacture, everything affording proof that the room was meant for daily occupation, not reserved for show. Grand, too, had been the culinary preparations. For some days even Frank had been banished to his own room and admonished to keep himself quiet, and what was more perplexing, to keep their little three-year-old son out of mischief. Doubting, however, whether the two together might not rather increase than diminish the probability of mischief, Ruth's bright face would often peep in at the door, her person nearly concealed by a large apron, her sleeves tucked up to the elbow, her well-shaped hands covered with flour, to ascertain, as she said,

that her "two boys" were behaving properly.

On the morning of the Beresfords' arrival a sad spectacle of disorder met her view. Frank senior had returned from meeting his cousins at the station, and was indulging in a game of romps with Frank junior, both being on all fours, and tumbling about in an imaginary game of hide-and-seek, the well-brushed hat and gloves tossed away in dire confusion, and both father and son dishevelled and breathless. On her entrance, this time divested of her apron, and having resumed the appearance of an orderly matron, they were visibly ashamed.

"'Ere's mudder; me 'ide behind naughty dad," said the little one, promptly, and with much cowardice concealing his small person; but, closely scanning his mother's countenance from his vantage ground, he detected a smile through the portentous gravity she had assumed, and, reassuring his father by the whispered confidence that "Mudder's only larfing," he rushed from his concealment and threw himself into her arms.

But Ruth was now in earnest. Placing the child in his own little chair, she desired him

to remain quiet till she returned. "Mother trusts Frankie," was all the admonition needed; she exacted the promptest obedience, which she invariably received. The boy worshipped his mother, rendering a loving submission to her slightest word. His father he considered in the light of a boon companion and participator in clandestine mischief, shamelessly abandoning him whenever discovery was imminent.

Having disposed of one of the culprits, Ruth turned her attention to her husband, surveying him from head to foot, to see that he was properly fixed, and reminding him that he was already late.

"Thou wilt return early and tell me all about thy cousins; I must not detain thee now."

"There is no hurry," replied Frank; "I have taken a holiday for to-day. But, Ruth, my darling, I fear you will find this English cousin reserved and conventional; I am almost sorry now that they have come."

"Not so," she replied; "it pleases me to become friendly with thy people, and thy cousins will surely desire to be acquainted with thy kinsfolk."

"As to Lionel himself, he is a thorough good fellow, though not over-burthened with sense; but, from all I have heard of her, and the little I have seen," he added, doubtfully, "it must be a curious *ménage*. She is said to be haughty and reserved, and, though extremely civil to me this morning, I can fancy it may be so. How Lionel and she can hit it off together I cannot imagine."

"They love each other, my Frank, or they could not have chosen one another. True love will fuse the hardest metals."

"I have my doubts about there being much love lost between them. However," answered Estcourt, "I must be off now, as I promised to call for Beresford and take him to the Club. I imagine that is more in his line than picture galleries. Are all your hospitable preparations finished, Ruth? You are not overtiring yourself, I hope," kissing her fondly as he spoke.

"I am not the least tired," answered Ruth, with a happy smile, "and all is in readiness. God bless and keep thee, my Frank."

Those were her invariable parting words. The earnest expression of her face as she uttered them showed that they were no mere formula, and Estcourt seemed to prize the

blessing. He had no fear of his wife being undervalued; he counted her as one of the loveliest and best of God's created beings, but he distrusted Agnes's somewhat haughty bearing, and feared that the cold reserve of her manner might chill the kindly heart and hospitable intentions of his own warm-hearted wife.

After he had left her, Ruth released the patient little boy, and the few quiet words of approval and the gentle caress which she bestowed on him, as she smoothed his fair hair, and took him with her to inspect the preparations, consoled him for his enforced quietness. These same preparations might have excited the envy and admiration of our old friend Mrs. Kent herself. Piles of delicious cakes, biscuits, pastry, stores of potted meats, preserves, clotted cream and jellies—such as she had helped her mother to prepare for festive occasions in the dear Western home, and in the preparation of which American housewives are skilled.

American housewives! To most people, whose ideas of American women are formed from superficial books of travel, this term will appear a misnomer, and will only bring to their imagination women of the type of

Agnes's dream. Sharp, quick, brisk, smartly-dressed specimens, herded together in the huge drawing-room of a monster hotel, lounging, rocking, idling, gossiping, having no homes to preside over, no duties to attend to; shopping, dressing, visiting, and dancing, the sole occupations of their lives, as dollar-making is that of their husbands and fathers.

But between this, a not uncommon type in New York, and the society of polished Philadelphia and literary Boston, the difference is as wide as the poles are asunder, and not less is the difference between even these and the country-loving, simple dwellers in the homesteads and farms of the far West. Among these latter dwelt the parents of Ruth. Her father was a descendant of the Pilgrim Fathers; he was a man of education, and had passed much of his youth in cities and amid stirring scenes. After his marriage he migrated with his wife to a farm in Pennsylvania; and, while their mode of life was ordered in all things in accordance both with the tenets of their peculiar faith, and with the simple pastoral ways of those around, yet there was a refinement and purity in their habits that marked their superior culture.

CHAPTER III.

WE left the little party entering the dining-room. The table had been prettily arranged by Ruth. A large bowl of autumn roses occupied the centre, flanked by small baskets piled with deliciously fresh fruit. A button-hole was placed for each of the husbands, and a fragrant nosegay for Agnes. The kitchen communicated with the dining-room by a buttery hatch, through which each dish was served smoking hot, and handed round by Miriam, the viands, though simple, being exceedingly well dressed. By Ruth's side stood a china bowl, containing the crowning triumph of her skill, a dressed salad of crisp young lettuce. It was a joyous repast. The conversation never flagged; there were no dull pauses, no forced observations, no conven-

tional small talk. Agnes's reserve melted before the sunshine of Ruth's gentle gladness, and Lionel also succumbed to the charm of her quiet grace.

After dinner they repaired to an adjoining room, half conservatory, half smoking-room. At one end was a low divan with its accompaniment of cushioned wicker chairs; while pipes, cigar-boxes, and receptacles for cigar ashes, scattered about, proclaimed the use to which it was chiefly dedicated. At the other end there flourished a luxuriant display of flowers, the object of Ruth's special care and delight. Settling her guests in the most comfortable places and establishing her husband in his favourite lounge, she excused herself for a few moments, but soon reappeared, followed by Miriam, with trays containing coffee and liqueurs. As Ruth entered, Lionel impulsively jumped up, nearly upsetting a stand of begonias in his haste to assist her. Estcourt, too, half-rose, but she stopped short on the threshold.

"Do not, I pray thee, stir," she said; "it is against our rules, thou knowest, Frank," turning towards him.

"Yes, yes," said Estcourt, resuming his

seat. "Ruth likes to serve us in this fashion, and she has bullied me into letting her have her own way."

But there was no lack of reverence or affection in his manner as he helped her to deposit her tray on a wicker table before she proceeded to distribute the coffee in small cups of Oriental china. Agnes's eyes followed her movements with surprise, not unmixed with envy, as she noted the care with which she prepared that intended for her husband, and adjusted the sugar to his taste.

This done, Ruth turned to Agnes, and showing her a stand of cherry-sticked Turkish pipes of all shapes and sizes, she said,

"Does thy husband smoke cigarettes, or will he prefer one of these? If so, I will fill one for his use."

"Thank you, Mrs. Estcourt," Lionel chimed in eagerly, "but —"

"Nay, nay, my name is Ruth, and thou shouldest so call me, since we are kinsfolk. This Syrian tobacco is quite fresh. I think thou wilt like these best," pointing to the pipes.

"But, Ruth, since I may call you so, I can't let you do it for me. No, no, pray

don't. I can't bear you to have the trouble, by Jove, a fellow—oh, I beg your pardon!" And poor Lionel, between gratitude, admiration, and astonishment, was on the point of relapsing into his usual jargon, from which by heroic efforts he had kept clear till now. Meantime Ruth had quickly filled the bowl of a long pipe, and having handed it to him, with a match-box, she brought a chair to Agnes's side, evidently prepared to remain.

"Well," she said at length, "why this pause? Are not the pipes to your liking?"

Still they hesitated; but at last Estcourt spoke.

"Perhaps Mrs. Beresford does not share your appreciation for tobacco."

"There you're about right," said Lionel, "Agnes never lets me smoke when she is in the room; indeed, she never troubles the smoking-room. No, no, we must not light up till the ladies are gone." These words were spoken in a half-aside to Estcourt, but his tone struck a jarring note in the harmony of the little party. With ready tact, Ruth remarked that the smell of tobacco caused headache to some persons, and asked Agnes to go with her to the nursery.

"Let me show thee my boys, and our husbands will join us presently in the sitting-room;" and with a nod and a smile she left them.

A bitter sense of regret had stolen upon Agnes, though she had not spoken much, for with her any deep feeling showed itself in silence, often mistaken for pride. The affectionate concord between the Estcourts, their bright, happy home, was a new revelation of what a home might be, such a home as she had never known, such a one as hers could never be. She followed the happy wife and mother to the nursery with an aching pity at her heart for her own fate.

"Gently, gently, my boys," said Ruth, as she opened the door, and was received with shouts of delight and an uproarious noise. "Come, Frankie, give thy hand to the lady, and make thy best bow, and thou, my wee baby," taking the little one in her arms, "thou, too, canst give thy hand, just so, like thy brother."

Agnes stooped to kiss the children, and her heart warmed to them, as hope whispered that she, too, some day, might have a fair boy of her own to love and watch over. After a few

moments, Ruth placed the baby on the floor, and proposed to Agnes to rejoin their husbands. Franky clamoured,

"Me come, too, to see Dad!"

"Not so, my boy, father is engaged; but he will come to bid thee good-night, and I, too, will come to hear thy evening prayers."

When the two gentlemen entered the sitting-room, Agnes and Ruth were standing at the door of a small greenhouse, a wired-off space within forming an aviary, in which Ruth kept and trained her pet birds. They would come at her call and perch themselves contentedly on her shoulder, singing with softer tones than the usual shrill whistle of the poor caged prisoners. The two wives were a lovely study for an artist's pencil. Agnes, with her tall, commanding figure, statuesque features and large, dark lustrous eyes, was a beautiful woman, yet there was a something wanting. Notwithstanding the stillness of her face, it lacked the expression of inward peace so conspicuous in that of Ruth; it was rather an outward calm, concealing the inward unrest, than a transparent covering revealing the inward calm. This, more than even the difference of features and colouring,

rendered the dissimilarity between these women so striking.

As Ruth leant forward to gather a spray of jessamine, a ray from the setting sun caught her figure, shedding a golden gleam on the ripple of her hair, which was of a soft brown colour, and was partly concealed by a small cap of snowy muslin. Her features were faultless, yet it was in their expression that lay Ruth's principal charm. Her eyes had a steadfast, shining light, a far-off gaze that told of faith and hope, such as would lift her above the turgid waves of earthly troubles, and set her, calm and confident, on the shore beyond. She exercised a peculiar influence on all who approached her. People were wont to say that in her presence they felt nearer heaven.

Ruth was dressed, as usual, in Quaker garb of grey; but on these festive occasions the gown was made of rich silk, the folds of which, standing stiffly on end, gave a quaint grace to her supple form. The sleeves, coming half-way to her wrists, were finished with a simple band of muslin of the same soft, transparent kind as the kerchief crossed over her bosom. After the custom of her people,

she wore no ornament, none save the symbolic circlet of gold, in this instance a true sign of heaven's choicest blessing, the union of two loving, trusting hearts.

The rest of the short evening was passed in arranging plans for the next day, Agnes gladly acquiescing in the proposal that they should join the Estcourts at breakfast, and that the two wives should pass the morning together, while their husbands amused themselves after their own manner. Estcourt accompanied them to their hotel, and leaving Agnes there, he proposed to introduce Lionel at the Club.

Contrary to her usual custom, Ruth had continued sitting, her arms crossed over her knee, awaiting her husband's return, with a look of perplexity on her face. Pleased as she had been with Frank's cousins, there had been a jarring note of discord which had painfully disturbed her, and she could not rest until she had talked it over with him. The manner of each to the other was so different from anything she had known in the dear old home, or in the still dearer new one. It might be an echo from that " world " against which her mother had warned her; yet no, for Lord

Walton, Minister at the Saxon Court, and his wife, though also of the "world," the phrase by which Quakers designate those who differ from their own tenets, were courteous and gentle one to another. But Agnes had an air of unrest, of discomfort; could it be that she knew not of true peace? Ah, if it were so, then Ruth could surely comfort her, and lead her to the source of all rest. As she thus sat, lost in so unusual a train of reflections, her husband returned.

"What! not gone to bed, you dissipated woman?" he exclaimed, laughing; but the sight of her disturbed face changed his mood, and he anxiously put the question with a gathering frown, "Has Agnes Beresford made herself disagreeable to you, darling? I feared she might. I am sorry we asked them to breakfast, and that I agreed to take Lionel afterwards for that expedition. Confound her airs and graces." he muttered to himself.

Ruth looked up with wondering eyes.

"Why, what ails thee, Frank? Agnes disagreeable to me? Ah, no! Far from it! I am drawn to them both; but, Frank, are they happy? Do they love each other as we do?"

Her countenance took such a pitiful, pained expression as she spoke, that Frank burst out laughing.

"Is that all, Ruth? Do you expect to find another couple of turtle-doves like ourselves? You may in vain look for that, far and wide; but," he continued gravely, "as to the Beresfords, I take it they are about as ill-assorted a pair as ever had the bad luck to come together, and are bored to death with each other already."

"Frank! what art thou saying?" asked his wife, looking up so horrified that Frank repented of his hasty speech.

"Cheer up, Ruth, I can't have you making yourself miserable about them; I was half chaffing. One can't judge in one evening. I daresay they are all right; besides, dear, you can set her straight, and show her what a haven of peace a man's home can be made; and then he's sure to run true."

"No, Frank, it needs more than that; but we will talk together, she and I. Poor thing! She has had no mother to guide and help her." And, so saying, Ruth rose up with a new expression of peace and hope.

CHAPTER IV.

ON the following morning the Beresfords arrived for the eleven o'clock luncheon breakfast, and if Ruth had looked lovely the evening before, now, in the bright sunlight, the transparency of her complexion and the purity of her beauty were even more striking. She had gathered the freshest flowers she could find, and had arranged them in every available corner; herself the freshest flower of them all, so at least thought her husband as he stood with her awaiting the arrival of his cousins. The bright day had dispersed Ruth's misgivings, and restored her to her usual glad serenity of mind.

She had settled the day's programme in her own mind. When their husbands had gone

out on their expedition Agnes and she would open out their hearts to each other, as the women in Holy Writ; and if any disquieting thoughts lurked in Agnes's bosom they would surely be dispersed as they thus spoke. Breakfast over, she gave her customary blessing to her husband and a friendly hand to Lionel as they departed.

Then Agnes was ensconced in the place of honour, Frank's arm-chair, and Ruth settled herself in her own seat, and, taking out her work, she looked up earnestly in Agnes's face, the expression she saw there again bringing a shadow over her own.

"Dear Agnes," she said, "I grieve that thou and thy husband must leave us so soon; but thou must be anxious to settle in thine own home."

With a pang Agnes mentally contrasted the harmony of this home with the cold disunion which would too surely exist in her own; but she refrained from giving any vent to these bitter thoughts. This cloudless happiness was absolutely unintelligible to her, and she longed to master the secret of a repose and contentment, so foreign alike to her own experience and disposition.

Passing by the suggestion of Ruth's words, Agnes replied,

"Tell me, Ruth, of your life here, and of your old home. Were you happy in it? And, if so, is it not a heavy trial to be parted from those you care for?"

With a smile of mingled thankfulness and tender regret, Ruth answered,

"Happy there? Ah, yes! I scarcely knew an unhappy moment in all those years, save when my two little sisters passed away. Though we rejoiced that they were taken to their rest, we could not but miss their bright presence. But ah! how near they seem to me now, nearer even than the dear ones at home."

"There can be but few homes, I imagine, dear Ruth, so free from every-day sorrow as yours appears to have been. One might imagine that you had never even heard of trouble."

"Yes; but there was another grief, though, thank God, it did not touch our home."

"What, then, was it?" said Agnes, strangely interested in all that concerned this woman.

The tears stood in Ruth's eyes, and her voice had a sorrowful ring in it as she answered slowly,

"It is a very sad story. On a neighbouring farm dwelt a family who were very dear to us, though not of our kin, an aged man and his two daughters; Rachel, the gentlest, the most loving, pious soul that ever dwelt on earth, and her young sister, whom she reared with a mother's care and loved with a mother's love. Ah, poor patient Rachel!"

"Did the sister die, then?" asked Agnes, as Ruth paused.

"Not so; would God that He had taken her! Yet no; for whatever He does is best. She was beautiful as an angel, and we loved her; but she was ever wayward, and vain of the loveliness with which God had endowed her. Agnes, I can scarcely tell thee the end. She left her home; none knew for certain of her fate, though Rachel guessed it but too well. For a stranger had come, a painter from France, who had begged to take the portrait of the little one. He praised her beauty, and the girl was well pleased. Poor Rachel! Ah, how she blamed herself for suffering this man to enter their quiet house. On the day before I left home, Rachel came and gave me a sacred charge. If ever I could find out her sister's abode, if ever our

paths should cross, she bade me let her know, and not lose sight of her darling. She would have sought her out in every country beyond the seas, but that she feared to leave their aged father for so long; with no clue to guide her, years might elapse ere she could find her lost one. Until that day I had believed that my playmate had been drowned. Sometimes, Agnes, I have a strong foreboding that I shall yet meet with her. The Lord grant that so it may be!"

"It is a melancholy story indeed," answered Agnes; "but, after all, this long separation from your own family must be very painful. Tell me all about them, Ruth."

To Agnes, who so rarely concerned herself about the affairs of others, there was something akin to magnetic attraction in the impulse by which she was drawn to question Ruth.

"Willingly. I love to speak of them; and it is so pleasant that Frank had learnt to love them, too, and that we can talk together of the old home. But, Agnes, a woman must leave her father and mother, and cleave to her husband; and even as Rebecca followed Isaac to a strange land, so gladly, though it

was sorrowful to part with my dear ones, did I follow my husband, to cling to him now and ever; and right blessed has been my lot!"

"Then it was there that you made acquaintance with your husband? How did he happen to come there? and where is that home of yours?"

"It is a farm-house in the uplands of Pennsylvania, far away from the busy centres of life. Our father had been blind for many years, and our mother being occupied with the cares of her household and of the little ones, it fell to the lot of my brother and myself to read aloud to him. We studied with him the Book, which contained, he said, all that we needed to know; nevertheless, we read likewise all manner of other interesting works. In his youth he had been in stirring scenes, and he told us of those times; he made us familiar with the history of this earth, and with the wonders of the starry heavens, and the hidden treasures of the deep. From my mother I learned all kinds of household work, that we might be prepared for whatever was in store for us. Ah! it was a happy life! And I then thought that nothing better could come till the blessed time arrived when we

should pass through the shining gates of heaven."

The gentle voice took a tender tone, the eyes shone with a still softer light, as, after a pause, she resumed,

"And then, dear Agnes, a change came. I bethink me of that evening when first I beheld my Frank. It was at the close of a hot summer's day. Father's chair had been placed under the old maple tree, our work was done, and I was reading aloud to him, when a stranger opened the wicket-gate. He was journeying through the far Western lands, wishing to see something of the rural life in those parts, and brought a letter from a friend who had dwelt with father in days of yore, commending him to his hospitality. He was made welcome. Strangers are willingly entertained in those primitive homes of America, and soon — ah! how soon — the world took a brighter aspect even than of old; his voice was music to my ear, though I knew not, verily, the meaning of what made my heart so joyful, till one day my mother asked me if I was willing to follow Francis Estcourt, even as the maidens of old times forsook all to follow the husbands who had

chosen them. He and I had been much together, yet I never dreamed of this; he seemed so far removed from me. My mother said they judged him to be a God-fearing man, although not of our own people. Dear mother! She had seen the love I bore him, though I guessed it not, and Frank had told her that he loved me, and thus it came to pass. We journeyed to the nearest city, where we could be married according to the rites of Frank's own faith; and truly I have learned to love the spiritual import of those grand ceremonies. As the time drew near for parting with my loved ones, my heart for the time was sore and sad, yet I felt comforted. I knew that God's blessing rested on us then, and He has guided and guarded us ever since."

Ruth clasped her hands, and a silent thanksgiving ascended to heaven. Poor Agnes! With a sore heart she listened to this simple recital, and contrasted her own motives in marrying with those of Ruth. For what had hers been? A restless desire for change, an ill-regulated mind, impatience of home troubles, perhaps other unavowed reasons that she scarcely guessed herself; and

yet, poor child—for in years she was scarcely more—how different had been her early associations, and the influences which had surrounded her.

At Agnes's earnest request Ruth went on to speak of their present life. It was a picture of home such as had never entered her own imagination. Devoted to each other and to their children, the life of the Estcourts was one of peace, yet full of occupation and of varied pursuits. But she was puzzled about their evenings. She had gathered that Frank went out alone, and she expressed her surprise that they did not go together; but Ruth had a ready answer.

"Thou knowest, Agnes, that with our people it is different; we do not deem it seemly for women to go abroad. St. Paul says that 'women should be keepers at home; and their ornament, that of a quiet spirit.'"

"I suppose, then," said Agnes, laughing, "you think us very wicked people?"

"Nay, nay, we judge not others; but for ourselves we must follow as the Spirit leads. Nevertheless, I sometimes accompany Frank to dine with the Minister, Lord Walton, and

his wife; they are kind, good people; and Frank's friends sometimes dine with us, but, as thou seest, they must be quiet, friendly folk to be satisfied with our homely ways. When I have gone to rest, Frank often passes an hour at his Club, as it is right he should do, but he does not go to many parties; he is unwilling to leave me."

"But, Ruth," said Agnes, "you have joined our Church, have you not?"

"Yes, and I love its glorious Liturgy and its grand services; but, nevertheless, I can never depart from the maxims of my people in regard to the life of the world."

"And does your husband," insisted Agnes —"forgive me, Ruth; it is not from impertinent curiosity that I ask—does he approve of your not going out with him, and does he agree with you on—those subjects that you have so much at heart?"

The faintest shadow crossed Ruth's speaking countenance, and she did not at once answer. If any misgiving was in her mind, she would be too truthful to deny it, yet she did not admit the thought that her husband was a whit behind herself in piety. The difference between his early education and

her own must account for any discrepancy in their opinions.

"Ah," she answered, "God only knows what passes within each of us; even our nearest and dearest are strangers to our deepest feelings. Frank, as my mother told me, is a God-fearing man and righteous, in so far as sinful mortals can be so. Verily, too, his faith in the Saviour is even as ours, but he judges things differently, according to his upbringing."

"And you do not mind the solitude, for his work must take him from you for most of the day?"

"Solitude? Ah! there is never solitude for me; every day and hour brings its occupations; and there are my letters to the dear ones at home, and theirs to me. I am always longing for more hours in the day. In the morning Frank reads the papers, and together we discuss the passing events. When work is over, we walk together; then there are the children and the household duties, and the poor suffering ones, of whom there are many in Dresden, both of my own people and those of Frank's. Solitary, weary," she replied,

with a low, rippling laugh; "how is that possible?"

Again and again she tried to bring Agnes to speak of her own lot, for she most earnestly desired to fathom the cause of that dissatisfaction in her friend so apparent to her own clear vision. But Agnes would not speak of herself. Once only something of the inward bitterness revealed itself, called forth by an allusion of Ruth's to an episode that had occurred among those she visited.

"Only yesterday," she said, speaking of the scenes of woe which she often witnessed, "I found a poor young creature in sore trouble. Her husband had left her to follow a strange woman. Poor thing! she knew not where to turn for comfort, for Satan held her in his bonds, and, instead of entreating the Lord for him she loved, she but fretted, poor soul, for the loss of his earthly love, and was moved to wrath and jealousy."

"What do you mean, Ruth? Moved to wrath? I should think so, indeed!" exclaimed Agnes. "He must be too worthless to cause jealousy; but the shame of it! What! a man to stoop so low, to break his vows, to lie, to deceive! Ah! but I forgot;

doubtless he is of the lowest class, where these things are common. The poor have no sense of honour as we regard it."

"I understand thee not. Truly they are working folk; but what of that? Sin is sin, alike in the lowest as in the highest, as you term them. God wots not of these earthly distinctions."

"But, Ruth, you would not have her lower herself to forgive him or to receive him back? It would be absolutely shameful."

"Satan has power over the best, if God permits them to be tried; and while abiding in sin, and unrepentant, the command is clear, 'Have no fellowship with the works of darkness.' But to withhold forgiveness, surely thou canst not mean it, Agnes?"

"Yes, Ruth, I do mean it, in such a case as the one you describe. If a woman were indifferent to her husband, the contempt for such baseness must for ever preclude forgiveness; but if the man she loved could thus turn traitor, could sink to such depths of treachery and dishonour, the love would turn to bitterest hate and sharpest scorn."

A lurid light gleamed from her eyes as she spoke in tones of lofty disdain, and Ruth

shrank back, distressed with the violence of her words. She folded her hands tightly, as if in pain, and after a few moments she said,

"If that were so, how could we use the Lord's own prayer, bidding us forgive as we desire forgiveness? But, thou speakest of love turning to hate. That, Agnes, could never be; our love, once given, is for time and for eternity, and depends not on the worthiness of its object."

"It sounds well in theory, Ruth; but if it came home to yourself—if your husband —"

Ruth started with a shudder.

"If," she said, in a low, pained voice, "if he whom I love with an undying love, were to be so tempted and to fall, day and night would I wrestle with the Lord for him; every earthly thing, even to my children, would I forsake, if haply I might thus rescue him. Ah!" she continued excitedly, "I would weary heaven with my prayers that he might repent and be saved; and it would be so. God would pity and restore him, and there would be joy in heaven over the repentant sinner."

"Yes, yes, but you could not possibly receive him back; you could not forgive the

personal wrong? It would be degrading in you to do so."

"Not receive him back when he repented of the sin and desired to return? Leave him to be tossed about the world, homeless? Turn traitor to the vow made before God? Oh, Agnes!" she said, in a low voice, "thou hast never loved?" But as she said the words she sank on her knees, and a sudden convulsion of sobs shook her frame.

Agnes was shocked at the perturbation her words had produced, but Ruth would listen to no excuses. She quickly recovered, ashamed of her own violent emotion, for among her people it is deemed sinful to give way to excitement.

"Nay, it was my own fault," she said, "and God suffered me to be overcome, to show me the fault. We are forbidden to anticipate the future. If the Lord sends trouble, He sends the strength to bear it. His strength is made perfect in our weakness."

Ruth had resumed her calm tone of voice, but she was still pale and trembling, as if possessed with a dread of some evil to come.

How often, in after years, this conversation was destined to recur to them both!

The next evening, the last of their stay, the Beresfords and the Estcourts dined together at the Legation. If Agnes had wondered at and admired Ruth in her own home, her surprise was greater on this occasion. She wore the same simple dress, with the addition only of a small bunch of natural flowers fastened on the kerchief, and the prim fashion of her garb gave a subtle charm and old-world appearance to her youthful figure.

Nothing could be more striking than the deference with which this young Quakeress was treated, and the intelligence with which she took her part in the general conversation. No wonder she had become so great a favourite with Lord and Lady Walton, and with the young men attached to the Legation.

There was but one exception to the harmony of the guests in the person of a certain Count Plevnitz, of whom we shall hear more hereafter.

Ruth was not slow to perceive that Lionel was bored, and thoroughly out of his element; and, turning towards him, she set herself to

draw him on to talk on subjects more within the scope of his habits and intelligence—no easy matter for these two, who had not an idea in common; but the tact inborn of sympathy and kindness can always discover some congenial topic. The word "tact" may appear inappropriate in connection with this girl, bred in the primitive fashion of her simple people. But there are two kinds of tact; or rather, two opposite qualities producing the same result. The one, in the common acceptation of the word, is the outcome of artificial refinement, as learned in the school of society; the other is the genuine expression of innate kind-heartedness. The counterfeit would draw a neglected guest into the general conversation, lest those present should suffer by the gloom of his silence; the genuine, lest his feelings should be wounded through his isolation. An unselfish, loving nature, such as Ruth's, would have the same harmonizing effect as the polished breeding of a fine lady.

Even Lionel seemed to fall under the spell which was cast by Ruth, though she herself was unconscious of it, over all who became intimate with her.

"By Jove," said he, as they drove home to their hotel that evening, "what an awfully jolly woman she is, eh?"

It was a strange epithet to apply to Ruth, but it already seemed that the influence of her example was at work, for instead of the sarcastic rejoinder that rose to Agnes's lips, she said quietly,

"Something more, and very different from that, Lionel—good and lovable."

"Ah! ah! yes," rejoined he, "that she is. Frank's a lucky fellow; a fellow could do anything for such a tender, loving creature."

It was quite a poetical speech for Lionel, but he made it in all simplicity, not intending to convey a reproach to his own wife.

The following day the Beresfords took leave of their cousins with genuine mutual regret, and with many plans for future meetings.

CHAPTER V.

THE middle of November found the Beresfords established in a comfortable apartment at Rome, and resolved to pass the winter in a place which each, for different reasons, found so enjoyable.

Lionel had become a member of the English Club, and speedily discovered "fellows" to his liking. There was the hunting, too, that he expected, and with infinite delight he returned to his old groove of life.

Rome had ever been the goal of Agnes's desires. Her classical reading had made it familiar ground; she had not felt that she was journeying to a strange place, it was rather as to one well known to her, and linked with memories of the past. Her vivid imagination repeopled the city with the hosts that had

for centuries lain silent in the tombs; she loved to wander about alone, musing amid the ruins and recalling the scenes enacted there from the earliest times.

Before leaving England, Agnes had heard that the Rothleys had some intention of coming to Rome, and though she would be pleased to see them, yet she was glad to have some time to herself before their arrival. But a trial awaited her, for which she was not in the least prepared.

One day, to her great surprise, she encountered Lady Katherine Toler, "Murray" in hand, conscientiously and painfully toiling through the Forum, and carefully reading each wearisome explanation. Agnes was sitting, lost in one of her reveries, when the unwelcome voice caught her astonished ear. She had no conception that Lady Katherine was in Rome, and, like a trapped animal, she impulsively looked round for means of escape, but, alas! there were none.

"This is, indeed, a pleasure, dear Mrs. Beresford," said Lady Katherine, the relief of finding, as she hoped, a companion giving a sprightly energy to her greeting.

"You have no book, I see. I can lend you my 'Murray,' or rather, we can go through it together. That will be much pleasanter than doing it alone. Oh!" she went on hastily, as Agnes showed unmistakable signs of intended flight, "do wait a moment while I read you what he says of the Arch of Titus. Unfortunately, my girls have no taste for antiquities, and it is delightful to find a congenial spirit."

Agnes was now fairly at bay, and finding, in her blank despair, no more plausible excuse than an imaginary engagement with her husband, she hastily had recourse to her watch, declaring she had not a moment to lose, and thus escaped her tormentor, pursued, however, by words of evil omen.

"So very sorry you have to go, but I'll make a point of coming here every day, so we shall have many opportunities of doing this charming Forum together. And by the way, do you happen to know to which hotel the Rothleys are coming? I hear that they are already at Paris, and may arrive any day."

But Agnes was already out of hearing.

For once in a way Lady Katherine's news was correct. The visit to Rome had been

decided upon, and, needless to say, not without its object on Lady Rothley's part. Her main trouble, just now, was in reference to her daughter Lucy, a most amiable girl, but so insipid and commonplace as to cause the despair of her mother, who could bear anything but a lack of individuality. Hitherto each of her daughters had been noted for some characteristic; one a beauty, another a blue, a third æsthetic, all musical, and some philanthropic. It gave, as she said, a *cachet,* and enabled her to fix upon the most desirable young man for each. Here, however, it must be mentioned that one or two of the daughters had ventured to disturb their mother's geometrical arrangements. The square ones had chosen the round holes, and *vice versâ.* Thus the beauty, who was destined to shine in society as the wife of some notable Peer, took to herself a young *attaché;* the intellectual one, who should have guided a brainless young lordling along the path of political success, elected to marry a country magnate, who cared only for pastoral triumphs; and the wit of the family bestowed herself upon a country parson. Still, Lady Rothley found consola-

tion. The *attaché* might become an ambassador, in which case the beauty of his wife would be most valuable; the country magnate should go into Parliament and carry weight, if not by his speeches, at all events by his political banquets, presided over by the learned Helen. The curate should be a bishop. Her main anxiety was about Lucy, who had no especial proclivities. It almost seemed as if the colourless disposition of the girl was bestowed upon her with her name, and Lady Rothley anathematised the rich godmother, who, having insisted on that appellation, had left her no money in compensation.

"Now," as Lady Rothley had observed to her husband, "something must be done about Lucy. As you were saying, dear, some taste, some talent, of course must exist; nothing is so likely to develop it as foreign travel. Why should we not this year carry out your favourite project of wintering abroad?"

"Ah, well—Oh! did I? Pau, then, I suppose, or Cannes."

"Oh, they would not suit you, they are so commonplace; you would prefer Venice, or Rome would be the place for you, and you

have so often wished to go there. Then we could go on to Naples," and after a little more of the same gentle and indirect pressure, it was decided to begin, at any rate, with Rome. If that failed in its object, and no interest could be evoked from Lucy either in art, or in the antiquities around her, if even the gorgeous ceremonials at St. Peter's, and the music of the Sistine presented no attraction to her, then Naples, and eventually Switzerland, might develop a love of scenery. Lady Rothley, who did everything methodically, and with a purpose, had arranged all the details of their travels with a view to "develop" Lucy. Having passed much time in Rome in her youth, she could pounce on the right pictures; she knew the churches, palaces, and ruins by heart, and thus could save the unfortunate girl from the weary round, in which Lady Katherine was so painfully toiling, and greatly to the credit of her skill, Lady Rothley found a means of turning even that tiresome woman to account. It is a precious art, that of utilizing a bore!

"Hugh," she remarked to Lord Rothley at breakfast, "it is so dull for you to drive alone now that I have our dear Lucy on my hands,

and what a kindness you would be doing poor Lady Katherine if you would take her out driving. You could help her so with your knowledge of history and classics. Poor woman! She gets so muddled with her Murrays and Bædekers." And so it came about that she rolled the care of her husband, he being nothing loth, on to the shoulders of the delighted Lady Katherine, and, as she said to Agnes, "The moral, my dear, being that there's a use for every created thing, even for Lady Katherine!"

This plan was carried out to the mutual satisfaction of all concerned, and vindicated Lady Rothley's frequent assertion as to the insensibility to boredom of the male species. But one drawback to the friendship thus instituted became manifest when Lord Rothley and Lady Katherine, in an evil hour, plunged into Italian politics.

"Dear Lady Rothley," said Lady Katherine, one afternoon, "that was a delightful party at Princess B.'s last night; her husband was a great friend of the Pope, you know, and it was so interesting to meet the distinguished prelates about whom one has read so much. Strange, isn't it, that one meets them so

seldom at the Court functions? But the Italians have shocking manners. One of them, a 'Monsignor', or some such absurd name, was introduced to me last night, as I was sitting by Lord Rothley. I was so civil, and I asked him so many questions, to show, you know, that I was interested in their affairs about the King and Queen, and all about the Court and Parliament, and Lord Rothley joined in. Would you believe it? The Monsignor stared at us, did not answer, and turned away. Then at the Embassy the other evening, one of the King's chamberlains was positively rude to your husband, who asked this Count Pippo to tell him something of the inner life of the Vatican, and whether he saw the Pope often in intimacy, or only on State occasions. I hardly understood what the Count answered, but that it was something very uncivil I could see by his countenance. They certainly have the worst manners."

This was a source of anxiety for Lady Rothley, but she felt sure that the evil would be only aggravated if she tried to interfere. Her best hope was that they would both be deterred from prosecuting their inquiries by the fear of being further snubbed.

CHAPTER. VI.

THERE was nothing in the Anglo-American society, with which Rome was inundated, to tempt Lady Rothley from her maternal purpose of developing Lucy, and this was incompatible with late hours and dissipation.

Poor Lady Rothley! She plunged into antiquities, attempted art, architecture, churches, galleries, palaces, all in vain.

"How pretty! dear mamma," was the girl's exclamation, when standing under the dome of St. Peter's. "How funny the broken down columns look in the midst of the Forum!"

Lady Rothley recalled, with one of those arch-smiles peculiar to her, how in her youth she had heard of one of London's dandies, writing home of the Colosseum, "That he

had been much struck with the vastness of its proportions, but that he was equally surprised at its not being in such good preservation as the one in the Regent's Park." What a pity that Lucy and Lionel had not mated; they could have "done Rome" together with such mutual satisfaction. Yes, Lady Rothley was baffled, but at least she had come to the conclusion that there was nothing in Lucy to be developed, and there is a great advantage in realizing a fact, even when it is an unpalatable one. She had done her duty heroically by the least attractive of her daughters; henceforth she yielded to the inevitable. Lucy must shine by—she would call it simplicity, not silliness, and perchance some budding statesman, immersed in the study of blue books, and requiring a wife who would not weary him with questions, but would dust his books, copy his letters and silently and unobtrusively admire his speeches, might see, in the simpering Lucy, the realization of his dreams. Lady Rothley would therefore fall back on the study of her own especial social *vade-mecum,* treating of the youths of society. But it must not be supposed that her versatile talents had been

exclusively occupied with the cultivation of what, by courtesy, shall be called Lucy's "mind." While steadily pursuing this paramount object, subordinate ones had not been neglected. She had resolved to keep an eye on the Beresfords; and Agnes reaped the benefit of her experience concerning men and manners, social duties, and personal adornment.

One morning, when speaking of a great ball to be given at one of the Embassies, to which they were invited, she laid down some special rules for Agnes's guidance as to her dress.

"When you cannot outshine people," she said, "never attempt to vie with them; go in for simplicity. Your diamonds would be nowhere among those of the Italian women. Let me advise you, Agnes, to wear that set of old Indian ornaments, and that lovely embroidered Indian muslin; each of its kind is unique."

This dress had been the crowning triumph of the famous *trousseau*. Out of the same chest which had contained the wedding gown, Lady Rothley had drawn other treasures of the Indian loom, among them a

fabric so fine that it might have rivalled the famous robe that could be drawn through a ring. It was the softest muslin, embroidered in gold threads with that marvellous taste which appears inherent in Eastern productions. It combined richness with extreme lightness and delicacy, and Lady Rothley decided that as even Elise could not be trusted with its manipulation, she would send it to Paris, whither she made periodical pilgrimages on the occasion of the presentation of each daughter, when she would take her to be inspected by the "Worth" of the day.

"My dear," she would say to her friends, for Lady Rothley was too good-natured to keep all her theories for her own sole benefit, "they've such an eye for these things in Paris. They can give such a *chic* to a girl, a style of her own. That's the great point. Always individualize your girl; let her be remarked."

And so the Indian fabric was sent to Paris, and the result justified Lady Rothley's previsions.

On the night of the ball Agnes looked superb—the grand repose of her beauty formed as striking a contrast to that of the

flashing Italian dames as did her simple costume to the magnificent jewels, the gorgeous velvets and shimmering satins with which they adorned themselves. It was the first occasion since their marriage on which Lionel had seen his wife in full evening toilette. There are women whose loveliness appears to greater advantage in simple morning dress, without any embellishments, but Agnes was not one of these. Beautiful at all times, the majestic cast of her form and features seemed to gain dignity and lustre by these outward embellishments. Lionel also showed to advantage. His tall figure, clad in the uniform of the Household Brigade, towered above the *decorés* of all nations, and his handsome face was radiant with good-humour. He was proud of Agnes, pleased with himself, and quite ready to receive and return the admiring glances bestowed on him by the Southern ladies. He showed his wife a devotion that flattered her. He piqued himself on the calm, quiet grace with which she received the homage of the men who flocked to be presented to her, so opposed to the ordinary coquetries which, however attractive when displayed by the wives of

other men, few Englishmen, even of Lionel's shallow type, appreciate when exhibited by their own. While pleased that she should be indifferent to the admiration she called forth, he was by no means indifferent to it himself. To men of his calibre, the suffrage of others is a tribute to their own taste, and had he not already cared for her, the adulation of which she was there the object would have brought him to her feet.

But he did love her in his own careless fashion, and at this time she might have gained complete ascendancy over him.

With an inconsistency, by no means unusual, Agnes would have been mortified by the withdrawal of the devotion in which she fully believed, while yet unable to requite it.

Her ignorant confidence in Lionel was at that time justified; he danced and flirted to his heart's content, but no deeper feeling was stirred. The evil lay in his acquiring a taste for the lax tone so prevalent in that society. It was a bad beginning to their married career, and one she herself promoted, in utter unconsciousness of the evil. She was not an exacting wife, and so long as she was free to indulge in her own order of life, and

Lionel appeared happy and content, it never occurred to her to speculate on the nature of his amusements, still less to suppose that he was returning to his fatal habit of gambling; nor did she realize that they were both learning the lesson, too easily acquired, of an entire independence in married life. Lionel occasionally accompanied her on expeditions, but his remarks made her tingle.

"A jolly place this must have been when it was all in the swing," he remarked one day in the Colosseum. "Those Gladiator fellows must have had a rough time of it, though; tiger shooting is awfully good fun, but that's quite different to being shut up in a pit with them."

"St. Peter's," he observed another time, "is a church and a half, by Jove, and no mistake—bigger than St. Paul's, isn't it? And, then, so much jollier with all the gold and red hangings about."

His efforts, therefore, did not meet with much encouragement; and Agnes was well pleased that he had the hunting and the Campagna to amuse him. If that had been all!

Thus they were at this time more nearly

happy than they had yet been. Lionel was thoroughly joyous, and content with all the good things of life which he most prized, plenty of money, plenty of fun, and a beautiful wife who neither thwarted nor questioned him. And with her, the old recollections were suspended; she enjoyed the novelty and the independence, and instead of the cold, repellant father, she had an affectionate and easy-going husband.

Herein was one effect of her peculiar upbringing. Of real, heartfelt religion she knew nothing, and she had created a code of morality for herself, founded on the basis of *noblesse oblige*. Having feasted on the chivalry of the Middle Ages, when the fair dames were virtuous, and their knights were brave and true, she believed implicitly that among the educated classes high morality and strict truth were as inborn as were vice and immorality among the lower orders. The surroundings of her youth had favoured this view. Much as had been done by the Rector, and palpable as was the improvement of morals in the village, still the cogent fact remained, that the lowest classes were prone to vice and immorality. The middle classes

were certainly a more respectable order, while the few professional people she knew, such as the doctor, the banker, and the lawyer, with their families, went regularly to church, and were models of propriety, as also, it must be added, of narrow-minded dulness. The only family of her own standing in the neighbourhood was that at the Rectory, and the few visitors who came, either to stay there or at the Priory, were all, on the surface at any rate, of first-rate moral excellence. Thus, Agnes had never seen, nor even heard of vice in high places, and it is hardly surprising that, left to her own imaginings, she had formed a sort of sliding scale of virtue and vice, rising in all its gradations from the low forms of the latter inherent among the most indigent and ignorant, to the high standard of the former in such as Colonel Malcolm and her father. It is important to dwell on this singular theory, as it exercised an important influence upon her after-life.

The Beresfords were now proposing to return to England, Lionel's leave being on the point of expiring. He was to join his regiment at Windsor on the first of April. A small house was taken in the neighbourhood,

and Agnes began her first experience of "home."

We will pass over the next few months, during which the state of her health excused her from entering much into society. In the autumn the regiment would move to London, where their permanent home would be fixed; and meanwhile they proposed to pay a few visits, among others to the Rothley's at Deneham Park, where we shall next find them.

CHAPTER VII.

A LARGE party, including the Beresfords, assembled at Deneham Park for the last week of the cricket season. The domain presented few features worthy of note. The house was a large, square, uninteresting building, standing in the centre of a flat deer park, in the ugliest part of Norfolk. Most of the estate consisted of grazing ground, in which fat beasts of all kinds were bred, exhibited, slaughtered, and finally eaten; the various merits of Shorthorn and Durham, Highland and Southdown, with the discussions thereon, forming, in Lord Rothley's opinion, the abiding interest of the place. The interior of the house had been made by Lady Rothley as comfortable as was compatible with its general squareness.

"My dear," she remarked to Agnes, whom on her arrival she brought straight to her own sanctum, after having suggested to Lionel that he should join the cricketers, and assist them in the arrangements for the forthcoming match, "my dear, in this part of Norfolk we pique ourselves on squareness; our rooms are square, our gardens and pleasure grounds are square, and even our country neighbours are all on a uniform pattern of squareness. The rest of the party, mostly relations, Lord Rothley's sisters and brothers, with their respective husbands and wives, my sisters and brothers with ditto, and my little niece, Eva Sinclair, are gone on a long expedition to see a square tower—a ruin of which we are not a little proud, as Norfolk does not, like Suffolk, abound in ruins. Take your things off, while I pour out the tea, and I will tell you all about the people here, 'post you up,' in modern parlance, and don't be shocked if I indulge in a little slang when my girls are not by. In theory I hate slang, and before them I still keep up that fiction, but one gets corrupted, and in truth so many new phases of life and queer specimens of humanity have appeared since my youthful days, that new

expressions are imperatively required, and between you and me, slang is so expressive. Now," continued Lady Rothley, "let me first tell you of our plans. Of course you stay here for the cricket matches and then for the partridges, after which we all migrate to the Tolers at Burley Lodge. I count on your doing the same."

"We are going there," answered Agnes, "but we meant to go back to Windsor between whiles. Surely it would be a visitation to stay on here for so long?"

"That shows your ignorance of the manners and customs in the Eastern Counties. To begin with cricket —"

"But, Lady Rothley," interrupted Agnes, "I know nothing of cricket."

"Agnes," said Lady Rothley, solemnly, "you must not speak so irreverently. I doubt you are in the benighted state of Mrs. Brown herself. Pray listen. During the entire month of August cricket is the beginning, end, and sole aim of our existence; batting, bowling, and fielding, the only pursuits worthy of mankind, including womankind."

Agnes opened her eyes. So unused was she to "chaff" that she never quite understood

whether Lady Rothley with her imperturbable gravity was in earnest or not.

"Still, my dear creature, do not hastily conclude that our minds are permanently restricted to cricket. From September, cricket is dethroned, and partridges reign supreme. To kill them, or failing that, to wound them, is the first duty, as it is the highest happiness of man. With pheasants begins the limit to our hospitality. For why, you will ask? Because we have only three good days covert shooting, and though relations may be compelled to eke out a miserable week, no sportsman worthy of the name would lower himself by remaining in one's house, whatever other attraction we might suppose it could offer, after he had finished slaughtering our pheasants. By going away late on Thursday, he may be in time for two more days that week elsewhere. If not, London with theatres and clubs, and 'having his hair cut,' carries him on till the ensuing Monday."

"And after the pheasants," laughed Agnes, "then you're interested in general subjects, I suppose; politics, literature, society?"

"Agnes, you have touched a tender spot. I was bred in a hunting country. I was taught

that from November man was a reasonable, estimable being only in proportion to the number of runs he could count, the number of deaths he had been 'in at.' Judge of what I felt when it dawned upon me that Lord Rothley did not hunt, nay, more, that in the country to which I had been inveigled in my youthful innocence a fox is scarcely held in reverence."

Agnes now laughed outright, perceiving that Lady Rothley was also laughing.

"To proceed, Agnes," continued the latter, resuming her absurd gravity, "Lord Rothley actually thought that the affairs of England in general, of the Army in particular, and even the state of the crops and other farming details, were quite worthy of a man's interest; and for myself, I can only say in self-defence that I was only nineteen when I came round to his opinion, but now that you remind me of it all, of course I feel humiliated at my degeneracy."

"But I have heard, Lady Rothley, that you are the politician of the two; in fact, that it is you who—who—"

"Govern Lord Rothley, I am sure you mean. People are entirely mistaken. He taught me all that I know, and all his ideas and

wishes; then later he grew rather—indolent and let the reins fall. I had to pick them up; somebody must hold them. Though so much younger than he is, I never was, and he never wished me to be, a mere reproducer of his opinions. He liked me to read and judge for myself, and," she finished up naïvely, "I did so."

Agnes was much amused at the idea of Lady Rothley reproducing anyone's opinions. From the little she had seen, she was inclined to think that the reins had fallen early into her hands, and had been held tightly and admirably ever since.

"But how about the people," said Agnes, "are they all strangers to me?"

"I hardly know, but they are excellent specimens for you to learn from."

"To learn what?"

"I mean, I think I have nearly every type of married life."

A grave, sad expression passed over Agnes's features, but Lady Rothley rattled on, not perceiving it.

"But let me explain these couples, and you will have the amusement of fitting the saddles on the right horses. We have a

sparring couple, a spooney couple, and a bored couple; then a husband-worshipper, and a husband-snubber; and last, and what I own exasperates me most of all, a matrimonial, mutual admiration and glorification couple; a pair who think, or profess to think—I always hope they quarrel a little in private—that everything either of them says or does is perfect, are always calling people's attention to each other's merits, and quote each other's opinions as decisive and indisputable. It's easy for such people to be, or appear to be, like turtle doves, if that is an advantage, but I think it's very silly. Give me people who can differ without getting angry, love each other in spite of faults, and make allowances for each other's weaknesses, instead of denying that any such exist. There's a speech for you. Now I hear the carriages. I'll take you to your room, and you shall put off making acquaintance till dinner time. I have given you food for reflection meanwhile, and have turned myself into a social lexicon."

They rose as she spoke, and Agnes was ushered into one of those cheerful roomy apartments which, though wanting in the dreamy repose and quaintness of those at the

beautiful Priory, have yet a bright charm of their own.

After Lady Rothley left her, Agnes fell into a reverie, suggested by some of the remarks, which had indeed given her food for reflection. In what category would Lionel and she be placed? Did Lady Rothley, she wondered, expect to add to her menagerie a specimen of "an indifferent couple?" For to that, alas! it had come on both sides, though still their manner to each other was perfect.

In society Agnes rarely spoke unless she took an interest in the subject under discussion, nor did she recognise the duty of keeping up a flow of small talk for the benefit of her neighbours at the dinner table. She judged of others by herself. To her it was infinitely pleasanter to listen in silence, if anything were said worth hearing, or failing this, to indulge in her own thoughts rather than endure the vapid remarks made for the sake of saying something, and be obliged to answer in the same style. Thus she was often absent, and was considered dull; but when the conversation turned on matters congenial to her, a bright flush of intelligence and

an animated smile would light up her usually grave countenance.

On this first evening, a Saturday, when at the magic hour of eleven the female procession moved to meet the male contingent provided with lighted candles, Lady Rothley darted across towards a bevy of youths, while each lady stood armed with her lighted taper waiting her return, and good-humouredly told them that breakfast next morning would be punctual, to enable the servants to get to church, and that Lord Rothley and herself would be glad to see those who could exert themselves to come down, but she added that there would still be breakfast for the lazy ones, though not the usual comfortable repast; and with a nod and smile to one or two who were frequent visitors, and saying that she knew she could count on them, she flitted back to the candles and their bearers.

This conventional custom was one of those which Lady Rothley abhorred, but, as she fully admitted, had been powerless to reform.

"The wretched hostess," she would say, "is dying of sleep and of boredom, but she dare not sneak off, for not only would the sleepy ones follow suit, but the unsleepy ones would

think it incumbent on them to do the same. No habit exasperates me more. The sudden rustle of garments, the meeting of candles at the door, as if one was at the Mocoletti at Rome, and then at the top of the stairs, that imbecile modern way of all the women and girls kissing each other. It's all intensely foolish."

An hour later, in the smoking-room, Lady Rothley's parting observations were discussed.

"I vote for early breakfast and church," hazarded one. "Lady Rothley is such a brick, it's a shame to put her out."

"Yes," said another, the little Viscount of our former acquaintance. "I'll go, too; somehow one gets out of the habit of going to church at some of the places where the other fellows don't go, and the people of the house don't seem to expect it, but one feels beastly."

"Oh, if you only go to please Lady Rothley, the parsons would say you don't do yourself much good," sneered one who had not yet spoken.

"Daresay not, but at least as much good as staying at home and displeasing Lady Rothley," retorted the other, at which there was a general laugh.

"You had the best of it there, old fellow;

he floored you," said one of the others, turning to the former speaker; "and it is a rotten habit never going to church."

"Oh, well, let everyone please himself. I never go, and don't mean to begin now; and you're in the same boat, I know, Fletcher," said this cynical youth, turning lazily towards the owner of that name.

"Y—e—e—s—s," answered that one doubtfully, not seeming so proud of the distinction as his friend expected.

The smoking party soon after broke up, and all the men, excepting these two, did manage to pull themselves out of bed and to scramble down the next morning to early breakfast.

On returning from church, they found the cynical young man awaiting them on the doorsteps, smoking an enormous cigar, ostentatiously dressed in a sporting kind of garb, surrounded with dogs, and endeavouring to look as if he had been engaged in Anti-Sabbatical sports. He was greeted cheerily, but seemed disappointed that no one chaffed him on his non-appearance. Fletcher had ignominiously retreated just before the church party returned, and, altogether, our friend felt less of an hero than he had intended to do.

"How do you manage, dear Lady Rothley?"

said Lady Katherine (who had arrived the previous day) plaintively. "I scold my boys and worry my servants, but somehow on Sundays the breakfasts always will come later than on other days." Lady Katherine generally spoke as if inanimate things acted of their own accord and joined with the animate ones to thwart and vex her.

"I have no boys to scold and I certainly do not worry the servants," she answered. "If they like to make excuses they can, but at least we need not give them any ready made. One thing," she went on, "I never can make out; those who don't go to church at all are at least consistent, but how people can make a point of going themselves, scrambling into the carriages at the last moment, and then leaving the servants to clear away late breakfast, puzzles me. The servants must either think their masters go for form and fashion's sake, or that their own souls are considered to be of another sort; and as to the young men, as a rule I think they follow the habits of the houses in which they chance to find themselves in." And to prevent further discussion, Lady Rothley pointedly turned to speak to someone standing by.

CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG the guests was a favourite niece of Lady Rothley's, Lady Eva Sinclair. "She is a dear little thing," said Lady Rothley to Agnes, "and I hope you will take to her. She is too much imbued with the tastes of the day, is devoted to sport, and likes to dress as much like a man as possible, but she is also devoted to George and to her child, and in many ways far above the society she lives in. You will often be thrown together in London, Agnes, and it would be a charity to draw her away from the intimacy of some I could name."

Lady Eva, when scarcely out of the school-room, had married Sir George Sinclair, and fancied herself desperately in love with him. He was rich, good-looking, and popular, had

the best race-horses, the best pictures, and the best china that money could buy, and, as a matter of course, his wife must be a paragon of perfection, and Lady Eva would decidedly satisfy the most fastidious taste. He loved her passionately in his own way, and surrounded her with every luxury. But a man like Sir George, who had lived his life, and was now addicted to racing and gambling, making the turf a profession and gambling a vocation, had neither time nor inclination for the pastime of love-making, while, on the contrary, Lady Eva's mind was full of romance, fed by a severe course of somewhat questionable novel-reading.

Sir George bore with much patience for a time the constant and somewhat monotonous refrain of "You do love me, dear Georgie, don't you?" Naturally he loved her, and what was more to the point, he assured her, with truth, that he loved only her, but when a hansom is at the door, with only just time to catch the train to Newmarket, and thousands depending upon the race, it is a trying moment to select for these endearments.

On the whole, however, they got on very well. The society in which Sir George had

lived was composed chiefly of racing men and racing women, many of the latter being no mean adepts at book-making. At any rate, they always insisted on being put on the best things, by which astute arrangement their male friends were apt in the end to be losers.

As to the inner lives of those with whom he lived, Sir George was not much enlightened. The ladies were correct as far as he knew. At all events, they were usually accompanied by their husbands, with whom they appeared to be on excellent terms, and though most people in London society could easily determine, when the names of the one sex were mentioned as forming some supper party or other gathering, which of the opposite sex would be also present, it is more than doubtful whether Sir George could have done so. He was immersed in his own affairs, and did not pay much attention to those of other people. Into this set he introduced Lady Eva, it never occurring to him that he was thus placing her in danger. She was pure and good, she adored him, and he wished her to be amused and happy during his frequent absences. Sir George was no jealous husband. Good-humoured in every-day life, he had

nevertheless the temper of a fiend, and with a keen sense of honour, a devoted love for his wife, and an absolute trust in her purity, the savage passions of his nature, should he ever find cause for suspecting her, would burst all bounds. He would surely jump to the worst conclusion, and turn his wife from his door without the smallest compunction. Agnes liked Lady Eva on further acquaintance. Beneath that sparkling gaiety, she thought she could discern a restless and unsatisfied heart. She was indignant at the coolness with which Sir George treated his wife's exuberant greetings on his return each Saturday evening and her equally gushing lamentations on his departure the following night, twenty-four hours being all he could spare to her. But he was invariably kind and affectionate, though shy of the loving demonstrations which Lady Eva showered upon him. Englishmen are not usually expansive in society, not caring to be the recipients of such attentions in public.

On the Monday morning the whole party repaired to the cricket-field, and Agnes found with pleasure that she was side by side with Lady Eva. These two formed a charming contrast, the tight-fitting costume of Lady

Eva, her collar and tie, and the billycock hat, in exact imitation of those worn by the men, giving her the appearance of a fair, animated schoolboy, while Agnes, paler than usual, owing to her state of health, and clad in more feminine garments, looked grand and regal.

A loud burst of applause at some feat of Lionel's, Lady Eva shrieking at the top of her voice in concert, gave Agnes the opportunity of asking what seemed to her to be a most natural question,

"Do tell me, Lady Eva, what did Lionel do then?"

But the astonishment with which her remark was received, mixed with as much contempt as Lady Eva's good-natured little face could exhibit, made Agnes draw back in haughty displeasure.

"Oh, Mrs. Beresford," said she, "you should really bring field-glasses if you are short-sighted! I wish I had mine with me," she added good-naturedly. "Jim Arden bowled a splendid ball, Bill Hope nearly caught it, but muffed it, and then Lio—" she quickly substituted the more formal appellation—"Captain Beresford made a magnificent catch."

This was gibberish to Agnes; but the

evident absence on Lady Eva's part of all intention of offence restored her equanimity. She began to wonder about these men; apparently they were cousins of Lady Eva's, for she had called them all by their names, and Agnes felt rather forlorn at the reflection that she herself had no relations. Turning again to her companion during one of the pauses, she said,

"You seem to have so many relations here, and I scarcely know one of them, or, indeed, any of the players."

"Relations!" answered Lady Eva, doubtfully. "No! I don't think I have got any relations here —"

"I thought I heard you call those two," pointing to Jim and Bill, "by their Christian names?" Shortened familiarly, she might have added.

Lady Eva looked puzzled.

"We're all great pals, you know, but not relations that I know of." Here she broke off abruptly. "But, hush! Time's up, Bob Denison's at the wicket; now we shall have some splendid play."

Agnes relapsed into silence, and in her turn was puzzled. At two o'clock they adjourned

to the house for luncheon, the more ardent spirits scarcely allowing themselves time to eat, and when these had gone back to the field Lady Rothley proposed to Agnes to walk with her to the little village close by, where she had some business to transact—when and where had she not business?—and to postpone their return to the cricket ground till tea-time.

"They would think us Goths if they knew it," she said, "but, happily, no one will have time to think about us."

Into the cottages popped Lady Rothley, patting the babies, producing embrocations for the rheumatics of some, prescribing for the ailments of others, and having a kind word for everyone.

They rejoined the rest of the party at tea, and Lionel, being "out," was extremely attentive to Agnes, eliciting the remark from Lady Eva to one of her pals, with a somewhat bitter intonation,

"Who would have thought of Lionel's being so spooney upon his wife? She's handsome, certainly, but dull and stupid. Conceive," she said, with her pretty nose turned up in supreme contempt, "she kept asking me what you were all doing."

The dinners and evenings now became very trying, when the day's performances were talked over, till the very words, "catch, run, batting, fielding," filled poor Agnes with inexpressible weariness. The following week was devoted to the slaughter of partridges by day, and to recounting the feats of the slayers by night, and towards the end of October most of the party migrated to Burly Lodge, the country seat of the bucolic Mr. Toler. Lady Katherine was in her glory. To entertain the Rothleys, the Beresfords, the Sinclairs, and several eligible young men, was to her the acme of delight. The Peri seemed to be on the verge of entering Paradise!

The sport was to be super-excellent. Mr. Toler was a keen sportsman, and spared no expense in the rearing and preserving of pheasants; and, if only the published accounts of his bags exceeded those of all others in his county, he demanded of fate no higher happiness. But to this end it was necessary to ensure that the male portion of the invited guests should be first-rate shots, which greatly interfered with Lady Katherine's schemes. If the husband of a somebody in the best set were a "duffer," or a

"parti," who had shown attention to the dear girls, were suspected of missing his birds, these were ruthlessly excluded from the hospitality of Burly, even although all hope of an invitation to a smart ball, or a proposal from the "parti," must in consequence be abandoned.

At the present moment, however, the fates were propitious. Lord Rothley did not shoot, Sir George would be absent during the week, and the eligible young men, including the little Viscount, were admirable shots. But poor Lady Katherine could never let people alone, and her fussiness interfered materially with the enjoyment of the party. Before breakfast was swallowed, she insisted on making plans for the day. Would the ladies walk with the shooters, or go and lunch at a neighbouring house? This was embarrassing. The younger ones did not care to commit themselves to a final decision until they were quite sure of the wishes of their particular friends of the sterner sex, some, if not all, of these failing to appreciate the presence of petticoats when intent on filling their bags. The elders depended on weather, and so forth.

By the time the proceedings were finally fixed, everybody had become more or less cross, and everyone found himself or herself more or less relegated to the wrong place. The evenings were repetitions on an exaggerated scale of those at Deneham Park. Somebody had shot somebody else's bird, or someone had shot across some other one, or a beater had been "peppered," which, however, was much less exciting. This went on with a persistence that made Agnes half regret the bats and balls.

CHAPTER IX.

"POOR AGNES!" said Lady Rothley one morning to Mr. Maitland, when the three were left to themselves in the library. "She cannot appreciate our sports, but I tell her they have their good side, for no doubt they help to give to our English officers the pluck and activity of which we are so proud."

"Pluck there may be," said Agnes, laughing, "but scarcely activity. From the little I have seen of partridge driving, and of the poor pheasants being hustled into a corner of the covert ready to be shot, it does not seem to require much activity; but, if it did, why need they talk of nothing else?"

"It is tiresome, I admit, even to me who am to the manner born," said Lady Rothley; "but Englishmen haven't the habit of general

conversation; they don't know how to *causer* like Frenchmen. As a rule they can only 'chaff,' or talk to each other, or make love to the favoured individual of the hour."

"My dear Lady Rothley," said Mr. Maitland, "permit me to observe that this is the fault of the ladies. Their society is supposed to refine us, and to raise the tone of our ruder minds. There was no lack of sportsmen in my younger days, but it would have been thought snobbish to talk only of our day's performances in the presence of ladies. Therefore I remark that it is the fault of the ladies."

"But, Mr. Maitland," said Agnes, "they are quite as keen about these sports as the men. They tell me that they never open a book, and have hardly time to look at a paper, so," she continued in a sarcastic tone, "it is difficult to see how they can raise or refine your rude minds."

"That is just it, Mrs. Beresford; their own minds are on a level with those of the men, and I repeat, this used not to be the case."

"Now, Mr. Maitland," said Lady Rothley, "you and Agnes are 'sticking to your points'

like Lady Katherine. There are two sides to every question, and I mean to take the opposite one to you both. Nothing is so dull as people who agree; besides, I disapprove of running down the generation we live in. But you will please to understand that I am not speaking of the few who make a noise, and call themselves society; of the women who ape the manners, dress, and even some of the vices of men. Pardon me, but of all the obstinate men I ever came across, you are the worst; you don't, that is, you won't, seize my point, or distinguish between our country men and women as a whole, and the small fraction (blessed be the gods that it is so small) who make up by loudness what they lack in worth and numbers. However, as I have apparently reduced you to silence, and Agnes to a state of imbecility, I will not go on. Gracious goodness, what is that?" as a book fell on the floor, and a figure emerged from a distant recess. "Fanny," she exclaimed to her sister, "you here? I thought you were gone with the others, it is an unprincipled thing to do, my dear, to hide yourself like that. We might have abused you, or—Fanny—"

"Yes, Jane."

"We might have abused—John." This with a wicked wink at her companions.

"No, Jane, I am not afraid of that, it would be impossible," so spoke Lady Fanny with conviction; "but I wonder where John can be. It is nearly one o'clock, and, oh! how neglectful I am!"

"My dear, you have not seen him for at least half an hour. He ought to divorce you; but please explain why you did not go out."

"Well, dear John did urge me to go, he is so unselfish, but—"

"Are you sure he didn't want to get rid of you?"

"Jane! But oh, where can he be?"

"Let us think calmly. He might be in the library reading, or gossipping with Rothley, or taking a walk."

"Alone." Lady Fanny clasped her hands in despair. "Only think if he went to look for me, and could not find me!"

"Very unsagacious of him not to look in here, the obvious place. Fanny, don't be angry, but I do most solemnly believe that John—did—not—want—you, but you have not yet explained why you stayed behind, and why you buried yourself in that recess, instead

of helping us to throw light on the respective merits of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."

"Because, Jane, I had to gallop through the book you lent me, lest dear John might be ready for the second volume, and, oh dear, perhaps he has already been wanting it."

"Already in the second volume, Fanny; it's not a book to be galloped through. Why, I only gave it to you yesterday."

"I had only got through one quarter of the first volume, when John happened to take it up, and liked the title, so I left it off in case he might want it, and went on to the second; but the interest has been a good deal spoilt."

"But why not have told John that you were reading the first volume?"

"Oh, Jane, how little you know of John's goodness. Why, if he had known that I was reading that book, nothing would have induced him to begin it until I had finished the first volume."

"How horrible! It freezes my blood to think of John having to wait."

"Yes, it would have been dreadful."

Lady Fanny took all that her sister said in sober earnest. She was many years younger

than Lady Rothley, and her share of the Celtic blood must have been monopolized by the latter, for Lady Fanny was a dismal, prosaic little person, all the small powers of her mind devoted to the worshipping of her commonplace husband, and the belief that few things were of importance except as they conduced to the comfort of that humdrum individual.

"Fanny," said Lady Rothley, "do tell me seriously, do you always treat poor John as if he were an imbecile?"

"What do you mean, Jane?"

"My dear child, it is only an imbecile or a baby who can't put up with the smallest inconvenience."

"Jane, how can you talk so? To give up to the person one loves, is the greatest pleasure in life. You don't understand true love."

"So much better than you, Fanny, that nothing would induce me always to deprive the person I loved of the greatest pleasure in life. Why, pray, is poor John never to share that pleasure with you?"

"Oh, you never can understand, but I have no time to discuss it; I must go and see what

John would like to do this afternoon." Saying which she left the room.

"Agnes, I hope you will take a lesson from my 'adoring wife.' You can scarcely credit what a slave Fanny makes of herself. To do John justice, he is not selfish above his fellows, but how a conscientious woman can encourage her husband in thinking that the world and its inhabitants were created for his pleasure, for to that it amounts, I cannot conceive. I believe she thinks Providence to blame for sending rain when John wants to go out, or has left his umbrella at home."

"Speaking of the couples you have here," said Mr. Maitland, "it is pleasant to see how happy Lady Eva seems to be with Sir George."

"And yet," remarked Agnes, "I have observed, even in the short time I have known her, that her spirits are unequal, excited at one moment, and tears in her eyes at another."

"I am sorry you have remarked this," said Lady Rothley, "for I always fear that she may get to resent George's neglect. It is a ticklish game to play with a sensitive little thing like Eva, that of letting her feel she is second, if not in his affections, at any rate in his life.

But I have been especially pleased with her latterly; she has taken to you so immensely, Agnes, and out shooting, instead of following those rampageous 'Bills and Jims,' I have observed that she walks with the steadier ones, Lionel for instance; you two can be of the greatest use to her."

Agnes scouted the idea of Lionel being of use to anyone, but she only remarked,

"Of her devotion to Sir George there can be no question, for only last night she was talking of her misery at his constant absences."

"I believe she is very fond of him," answered Lady Rothley, "although her talking about it is anything but a proof of devotion."

"Do you mean," said Mr. Maitland, "that she would wish to persuade people of that devotion without feeling it?"

"By no means; Eva is incapable of subterfuge. If she wishes to persuade anyone, it is herself. I only trust George has not carried his neglect of her to the point of making her indifferent. It may be the combativeness of my nature, one should not judge of others by oneself, but it seems to

me to be self-evident that the strongest feelings of one's nature have a natural tendency to conceal themselves. So, when I hear people discanting on their personal experiences of religion, or on their devotion to their husbands and children, their happiness together, or misery apart, it gives me an odd sensation, just as when I go into a house strongly smelling of pastilles, my olfactory nerves immediately sniff for the bad smell they are meant to hide."

They both laughed.

"I agree with you in a measure," said Maitland, "but you must make allowance for different natures. Some people carry their feelings on the surface."

"Then, depend upon it, they are not deep feelings, or they would sink down out of sight; but as I was saying in regard to Eva, in the first year or two after her marriage she used to break her heart over George's absences, though she struggled bravely to hide it. Now if she finds herself becoming indifferent, she would be filled with remorse, and would assure her friends of her misery, in order to conceal from herself its absence. It is a matter of every-day experience; but what-

ever may be the right theory, in practice a devoted wife and mother doesn't talk of her own love for her husband and children, though she may talk too much about them. Her love is a matter of course. Those, *per contra,* who neglect their household gods talk much of their devotion. It is the same in other matters; if anyone makes elaborate excuses for not coming to see you, or sends you pages of apology for not writing, what do you conclude from it, my wise philosopher?"

"That they are very civil, but absolutely indifferent."

"Exactly; there is a different code between people who care for each other and those who do not. Take quarrels and small offences. If somebody to whom you are indifferent is offended with you, you take no notice; there is even a malicious pleasure in ignoring their grievance."

"There are two opinions as to that; some think it wiser to let things pass rather than risk a quarrel."

"Those who say so are the indifferent ones I speak of. It bores them (how well I know the feeling) to enter into explanations; therefore they affect not to see that anything

is amiss. I've done this often, and have enjoyed the deepest satisfaction, in thus foiling my foe. But with mine own familiar friend, I cannot rest until I know wherein I have offended him. The opposite, of course, holds good. If I felt hurt with any of those I cared for, and they ignored my annoyance, I should know they did not care two straws for my affection."

"I agree with you," said Mr. Maitland, "that offences are apt to rankle if they are pent up, but the reverse of the medal is, that people, when they get heated in discussion, are apt to say cruel things not easily forgotten, even if forgiven."

"Moral, keep your temper, and don't say bitter things. But for myself, I can forgive any words said to me in anger sooner than the indifference implied in the other case. Your old recollections of duelling," she added, laughingly, "probably come back to you, and no doubt if I expected to be shot for a hasty word, even my ardour for explanations might be cooled, but, as Lady Katherine says, I end as I began (how like her I am getting), have it out with your friends. Are you asleep, Agnes? Why don't you speak? I hate the

way you listen to our arguments, and don't commit yourself to an opinion. Now you might be offended, and we should give Mr. Maitland a practical illustration of the verb, 'to have it out.'"

"I was siding with you theoretically, Lady Rothley, but practically I could not do it. I could not let anyone see that I was wounded. I should conceal it with pretended indifference."

"Pride, my love, wicked pride, and real indifference. If you loved anyone very much, you would not succeed at any rate; your wounded feelings would betray you."

"I think," said Agnes, very slowly, "that I should succeed."

"Well, then the exception proves the rule, so you have proved me in the right, and have left me in proud possession of the last word."

CHAPTER X.

THE whole party were assembled at luncheon one day, a downpour of rain keeping the most ardent sportsman at home.

Towards the end of the meal the letters were brought in and handed round. It is a trying moment, the advent of that delightful institution, the second post. Those who do not receive any letters have leisure to observe the countenances of the happy possessors of a budget, and a shade of ill-humour enhances the curiosity of the neglected ones.

Nailed to their seats, the unfortunates who may be expecting, or dreading, some pieces of intelligence about which they specially wish to conceal their anxiety, have to run the gauntlet of curious eyes fixed on them.

"Well," says a tactless, possibly a malicious, neighbour to a young girl who is bent on postponing the perusal of a letter until she can escape from the room, "why don't you open your letter and tell us the news? I see it's from Lady —, who is sure to know if the report of Captain C—'s marriage is true."

It is this very news that the poor girl has been schooling herself, with an agony unguessed by her nearest relations, to bear with assumed indifference, and too well she knows that from the letter in question she will learn if she has been deceived by Captain C—'s apparent devotion to herself.

"Eh, George," says a youth to a friend, "Newmarket postmark, I see—tell us what news from Joe Atkins—Antelope still all right?"

This in the presence of his mother, who fondly believes that her George does not even know the name of a race-horse!

On this occasion, Lady Katherine examined her letters with a fussy importance, and presently exclaimed aloud,

"Mrs. Beresford, I have a delightful surprise for you; who do you think is coming

here to-morrow? I would not tell you, for fear of disappointing you, till I was certain. Now guess."

The attention of everyone was instantly rivetted on Agnes, surprise being added to curiosity, for who could possibly excite a strong interest in the breast of that calm, cold woman, apparently so impervious to emotion? Whose name could have power to call up the faint flush which overspread her countenance? Only one pair of lynx eyes saw more, and rightly interpreting the nervous clutching of the hands, and the slight tremble of the lip, flew to her rescue.

"Please forgive me for interrupting you, Lady Katherine," said Lady Rothley, "but my news is so startling that you must let it have the precedence — a marriage! Ten guesses for each of you!" The dozen pairs of eyes were effectually diverted from Agnes's face. "Lord — marries Miss —, a duke's eldest son to £50,000 a year in cotton!"

"Is that all?" said Lady Katherine, somewhat offended, even with her dear Lady Rothley for ruthlessly interrupting her announcement, "why, that's quite stale news!"

"At least three days old," remarked Mr.

Maitland, laughing, "a matter now of ancient history."

He at once divined Lady Rothley's motive, and was prepared to assist her, and for the time attention was withdrawn from Agnes, and fixed upon dukes and cotton lords. Lady Katherine resumed, but in a crestfallen fashion, that it was Colonel Malcolm whom she was expecting, but the party had, by that time, broken up into small factions, and were discussing the various items that each could glean from the other's letters, so the announcement fell comparatively flat, and Agnes was able to answer, with well-bred interest, that she would be very glad to see him again, and Lady Rothley to remark how sorry she was at being obliged to return home the very day of his arrival. The rest, still immersed in cotton and dukes, scarcely heard or heeded, and soon dispersed to their afternoon amusements. Agnes pleaded having letters to write, and retired to her room.

CHAPTER XI.

AGNES had gone up to her room under the pretence of writing letters, but in truth to realize that the moment was close at hand when she and Malcolm would meet once more. More than a year had passed since that marriage morning, and how much had happened in the interval! Looking back, the months had seemed as years; and yet, when she thought of Malcolm, it appeared but as yesterday that they had parted—every word, every look remained fixed in her mind, and when she saw him once more they would take up the thread of the broken intercourse, and all would be again as if no interval had occurred.

Was Agnes quite candid with herself in this? Did she believe that she felt for

Malcolm exactly as she had done in her youthful days? No, by no means, for she told herself that in those far-off years she had been too childish to appreciate him, too far removed from him in thought and feelings; but now she was a woman, and they could be friends, and in the uncertainties that often beset her path she could turn to him for counsel and help.

Thus was it that she settled with her conscience. Well she remembered her petulance in former days whenever she read in his grave countenance disapproval of her wayward humours. But how different it would be, now that she had experienced some of the realities of life, and had learned that her existence was a failure, inasmuch as, except, perhaps, Lady Rothley, there was no one she cared for, no one to draw her out of herself. To be sure, there was Eva Sinclair; she pitied her and meant to do all she could for her in the dangerous path she was treading, but it would be one-sided sympathy—for what could Eva, what could anyone do for her, except that one who had known her from a child, and was so wise?

Malcolm arrived on the following afternoon.

With a thrill of glad expectation Agnes had gone down to the library, where afternoon tea was served. The party was reduced to the Toler family, the Sinclairs, and one or two men, Lady Katherine coming in to make tea in the state of languid fussiness common to her. She was sure the kettle did not boil, sure the carriage had not gone for Colonel Malcolm! How strange that the shooting party had not returned!—could any accident have happened? Had the pony carriage waited for the ladies, or come back by mistake? The bell was rung for each of these several questions to be solved, the footman answering mechanically, "Yes, my lady," "No, my lady," as one accustomed to the same, or similar inquiries, every hour of the day. How indescribably wearying was all this to her guests! Not, however, to Lady Katherine herself. Her whole life was given over to fuss; doubts about boiling water, misgivings about accidents, orders, counter-orders, arrangements made to be upset, rearranged, and finally left in their original form. She was now, for the fifth time, wondering if anything had happened to the train, and remarking, for the sixth, that she

hoped Agnes would be pleased, as she had pressed Colonel Malcolm to come on purpose to meet her, when his hearty greeting made itself heard.

"Oh, how do you do?" exclaimed Lady Katherine. "I feared something had happened. But why were you not announced? So like my servants!" And she fell straightway upon John, who had, however, performed his part properly, though Lady Katherine's babble had prevented the formal announcement from being heard. Thus, while she was scolding John, the first few words spoken between Agnes and Malcolm had passed unnoticed. Those words were few, and might have been proclaimed upon the housetops.

"So glad to meet you, dear Agnes, if I may still call you so?"

"How could you call me otherwise? You may well imagine how glad I am to see you!" That was all, but a gleam of radiant joy shone in her eyes as she spoke.

Malcolm had schooled his heart well. For thirteen long months he had accustomed himself to think of her as the wife of his ward. He had not attempted the impossible task of forgetting her, nor did he even wish

to do so; he never fenced with the truth, to himself or to others, and he attempted no evasion. Having loved Agnes with his whole heart, that love had become a sin. It must be resisted, wrestled with, and finally overcome, not ignored and put aside. He therefore accepted the invitation to Burly, and in this he was wise. He expected no miracle, and knew that the first meeting, whenever it took place, must cause him a sharp pang. It was characteristic of the man that he did not try to persuade himself that it could be otherwise; therefore he was armed at all points, and in this he had the signal advantage over Agnes, who, poor soul, knowing nothing, and understanding nothing of her own feelings, felt no need of struggling, and gave herself up to the happiness of his presence without a thought of danger. It was as an awakening to consciousness after a long torpor; the delicious sensation of returning health after long sickness. The blood seemed to course through her veins with unwonted vigour and elasticity, and there was a sparkle in her eyes, a joyousness in her expression, that astonished Malcolm. He utterly mistook the cause, believing it to be the result of happiness with her husband.

He did not know of the cold listlessness and the weariness that had hitherto underlain her whole life, and especially so in her own home. Yes, he believed in her love for Lionel, and rejoiced; for he loved her now, as he had ever done, more than himself.

Lionel was pleased to see the one man he respected, and before whom he was always at his best, Malcolm possessing the 'enviable faculty of drawing out the good that exists in most people. For one thing, he always believed in them.

How great would have been Lady Katherine's exultation could she have known that this week, passed in her house, would be looked back upon by some of those assembled as the last of their happy days, unclouded by misgivings for the future or remorse for the past. She had no need to fuss over their amusements; the days were all too short.

The sun shone brightly on the first day of the covert shooting. The leaves in some outlying coverts had obligingly fallen, and the pheasants, not being prepared for resistance at that early date, were equally obliging in letting themselves be killed. Agnes, Lady

Eva, and the Toler girls joined the shooters at luncheon, and a more joyous party had seldom assembled. Looking only on the surface, the component parts seemed to lack no elements of happiness and security. There were a few days of unbroken pleasure, and then the party broke up without much leave-taking, as all were soon to meet again in London, and would probably live for the future much in each other's society. The Beresfords returned to Windsor, the Sinclairs went on a tour of visits, and George Malcolm resumed his duties at the Horse Guards. He was right. It had been an unutterable pang to meet Agnes again as the wife of another, but he had not flinched in his resolve, and he believed that henceforth all the old feeling would be merged in the one paramount desire for her well-being.

The Talbots were now established in London, and Malcolm, living in the parish, had enrolled himself as a lay-worker, and was devoting his spare time to helping Herbert in his organizations of various good works. His late meeting with Agnes was fraught with peaceful memories ; the sight of her contentment lifted a load from his mind, for over and

above his personal feelings there had lain a great fear for her. There was possibly something of bitterness, mixed with surprise, that one so inferior to herself should have had power to stir the depths of her heart; but he nevertheless rejoiced in her happiness. Now she did not want him; and when her child was born, her satisfaction would be complete. That page of his past history being irrevocably turned over, he could set himself, with a determined will, to the duties and occupations of the life before him, resolved to accept whatever share of happiness might yet fall to his lot.

CHAPTER XII.

ON returning to Windsor, Agnes found, to her dismay, that the enjoyment of the last few weeks had entirely unfitted her for the duties of her present life. She had endeavoured, during the past summer, to take an interest in the society of Lionel's friends; at any rate, she willingly pleased him by receiving them at her own house, and by visiting them at theirs. But they did not suit her. She found the wives to be either dull, or else brainless, frivolous beings with whom she had not one idea in common.

The men were, for the most part, of his own type; and though she was courteous to them at her own table, had she been asked to repeat any part of the conversation during dinner, her memory would have retained

nothing but a confused aggregate of phrases, of which "old fellows," "rathers" and "awfully jollys" formed the staple. She had become partly habituated to the fashion of their talk, and had acquired the power of putting in the necessary words of civility while her own thoughts were busy elsewhere. Now this faculty of passive endurance seemed to be deserting her. She had again enjoyed the companionship of congenial spirits, such as Lady Rothley, Mr. Maitland, and, above all, the dear old friend with whom she could linger over the memories of former scenes, that past which she now viewed through rose-coloured glasses. It seems to be a benevolent law of our nature, that in all retrospect the happier moments are those to which memory most fondly clings, while the troubles and vexations that at the time seemed to overshadow them, are effaced from our recollections. Yes, the calm indifference, to which she had brought herself, was now exchanged for a restless dissatisfaction with her husband and her surroundings; but she decided that it was languor, incident to her present state of health, which caused the morbid sensations, and that when her child was born all

would be different. She supposed that, like others she had known, she would be able to make of that child the occupation of her existence, though at present it was difficult to understand how a little baby could fill the mind and satisfy the heart.

The Beresfords were to settle in London at the end of February. The old house in Hill Street was to be had on lease, and they had taken it for a term. Agnes determined to bestow much care on its furnishing, and especially on the arrangement of the nurseries. She would make their home cheerful for Lionel by frequently inviting their mutual friends, and, of course, Guardy would have his permanent place by their fireside.

Then, too, Agnes meant to be kind to Evelyn, who had evidently never admitted Lady Rothley's foolish idea as to the probability of her marrying George Malcolm, and Agnes asked herself how she could ever have believed in such a possibility for two people so utterly unsuited. She felt certain that Guardy had never dreamed of Evelyn as a wife any more than he had thought of herself in that light. It was too absurd! Dear old Guardy! Some day he would marry, doubt-

less a sensible, nice, middle-aged woman, and meantime he should always be made welcome in their home. As to Evelyn, Agnes determined to find a husband for her in some pleasant, good sort of young man, and she would get them to meet. Yes, she would rival Lady Rothley as a match-maker, only a more successful one.

They moved to London in January, and thus Agnes found herself once more among the memories of her girlish life.

She stood in the small room on the ground floor, recalling the day when she had been arranging it with so much care, and when the Rector had come in and surprised her with the tidings of the change in Malcolm's plans, and again she reflected on the cause of that sudden change, which he had never striven to explain. It seemed as if from that hour dated all her unhappiness. Very soon after that day, and consequent upon it, her own marriage had been arranged, but at this point of her reflection Agnes pulled herself up sharply, for though she knew she did not love Lionel as a wife should love her husband, never had she distinctly admitted to herself that she regretted her marriage.

The Sinclairs were in London, there being the usual winter hiatus between the race meetings. They all met frequently and dined together, and it pleased Agnes to find how kindly Lionel had taken to her friend, for such, to a certain extent, Lady Eva had become. Often in the evening, when Sir George went off to his club, Lionel would remain at home, and innumerable were the games of piquet with which he and Eva amused themselves, Agnes not feeling herself at present equal to much exertion.

As the time of her confinement approached, she strove to interest herself in the preparations for that coming event, but as regarded the child itself, whom, in common with most young mothers, she had decided must be a boy, her imagination always leaped over the first year or two of babyhood, the specimens of youthful humanity she had hitherto met with being the somewhat grimy and ill-favoured infants owned by the labourers on the estate, from whom, while civilly inquiring after their well-being, she had instinctively averted her eyes. This stage of life, therefore, had little attraction for Agnes, but she eagerly looked forward to the days when her boy's intelli-

gence would develop, and his early education would begin, and when, with the assistance of Guardy's counsels, she would train the child into an ideal of lofty perfection. On what ground she held George Malcolm to be an authority in the management of young children it may be superfluous to enquire, but none the less in that one groove did her thoughts always run; and when, in the month of March, she was prematurely confined and the child lived but a short time, the loss, though more of a disappointment for the future than of grief in the present, affected her deeply. It was unfortunate that Lady Rothley, who had promised to preside on the occasion, was engaged in a similar occupation with one of her own daughters. Like a popular "Gamp," her services could only be counted upon in cases of punctual performances, and Agnes sadly missed the cheering presence which would have been of untold comfort to her in her present frame of mind. She grew to be morbid in her weakness, and felt that nothing could go right with her. When she laid herself out to make friends, they failed her. A change had latterly come over even Eva

Sinclair, who called on her less frequently, and whose manner, when she did come, was cold and constrained. It was ever the old story. Do what she would, Agnes felt that she could not retain any true affection. Lionel, in the first instance, did his best to evince sympathy, but his efforts had been damped by his soldier servant, who, having much experience in these matters, promptly quashed his master's funereal intentions in the matter of an exceedingly broad hat-band; and subsequently by the nurse, who objected to the crackling of newspapers when he tried to cheer his wife by reading scraps of sporting intelligence, and whose countenance betokened unmistakable disgust at the traces of cigarettes. His visits to the sick room were, therefore, not a success. The doctor, noticing Mrs. Beresford's apathetic demeanour, which he ascribed to physical weakness rather than to its true cause of mental depression, ordered the usual resource of change of air and the seaside as soon as she was able to travel; and thither Lionel accompanied his wife, making praiseworthy efforts to suppress his boredom by taking deep interest in the arrival and departure of

the steamboats, and looking with eyes of envy at the happy beings who were bound for London. Both husband and wife were equally relieved when, the prescribed fortnight being ended, they were free to return to Hill Street. Even so far back as the winter they had passed in Rome they had drifted into totally different habits of life, and these were now bearing their natural fruit.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY KATHERINE was giving a great ball, concerning which she had considerably worried herself and her friends for several weeks past. The problem to be solved was, how many of those who wanted to come she could in conscience leave out, how many of those that wanted to stay away she could induce to come.

Evelyn was staying with Lady Katherine for this ball. On the following day her parents were coming to London, intending to pass a few days with the Tolers before returning with Evelyn to their Rectory in —— Square; but on their arrival, instead of that unmistakable look of disorder, so inevitably the sequel of an entertainment, which they expected, they found the house swept

and garnished, as for a coming festival. Lady Katherine was in a more than usually wailing condition.

"Why, Kate, what has happened?" exclaimed the Rector.

"Oh, only my usual luck! I had to put off my ball till to-morrow, and nothing postponed ever answers; and the girls, too, are so provoking. They wanted to go on with it, because most of their partners move to Shorncliffe to-day. They are so ungrateful, when I toil for their good."

"But why, Katherine, did you put off your ball?" said Mary Talbot.

"Because, at the eleventh hour on Tuesday, Lady D. put forth a small dance for last night, to meet their Royal Highnesses."

"Well, then the girls get two balls instead of one?"

"Mary, you know perfectly well that we are not sufficiently in the set to be asked to those small dances—quite small—only nine girls and twenty or thirty married women."

"Then wouldn't it have been an advantage to your ball, to get rid of so many married women? You are always saying they spoil the balls for girls."

"You are too provoking, Mary; you can't really be in earnest! If I gave a ball the same night, it marks me as being nobody, and I could never expect to be considered anybody again. And then," she continued, fretfully, "no men would come."

"Now I understand," said Herbert, "and sympathize; only it seems to me that all the dancing men in London wouldn't be invited to meet only twenty or thirty ladies —"

"All the men! Herbert, when you get outside school-feasts and pulpits, you do get so muddled. Of course, I mean the best men."

"Those who dance best?"

"No, those men scarcely ever dance at all; and never with girls, unless just the smartest." This she said with an air of defending these young men from an unjust accusation.

"Ah! the cleverest, most distinguished, perhaps?" continued the Rector, wickedly bent on riling his sister.

"Herbert, don't be provoking—of course not! They are not what *you* would call clever, or distinguished," said Lady Katherine, again coming to the rescue of their aspersed reputations. "But, there, it is of

no use trying to make you understand: I thought Mary would know better!"

"I beg pardon, Kate; as you say, these things are not in my line. I'll go and find Toler; we shall not be in your way to-morrow, as we have promised to dine and sleep at the A.'s, at Putney."

At this moment Lady Rothley was announced.

"Alas! I am come in person," said she with an air of concern, "to tell you how grieved we all were at your putting off your ball, as unfortunately we are leaving town to-morrow for a day or two."

It seemed now to Lady Katherine as if her cup were indeed full.

"Oh! how terrible!" she said; "and I counted on you; but of course, last night you went to the D.'s, so you would not, in any case, have been able to come to me."

"Indeed, but I should most gladly have come; the girls were much disappointed, for only one was asked to Lady D.'s. We meant to look in there for half-an-hour, and then to come straight on to you. It was not a ball for girls. Emily hated it."

Lady Katherine looked her astonishment;

and her brother, who had remained to speak to Lady Rothley, could not resist saying, with a twinkle in his eye, "But you had all the best men, Lady Rothley."

"Then bad are the best, if we had them—at least, they are not the sort that I care for; probably," she added, laughing, "they would say the same of us. They wouldn't dance with my girls; the grapes may be sour, but certain I am that they are no good to those they do condescend to dance with."

"By-the-bye," said Lady Katherine, "did you see Mrs. Beresford? She, of course, would be at Lady D.'s; she is always in luck."

"She didn't look as if she appreciated her luck, then; she seemed bored to death."

"Oh! that is on account of Captain Beresford, I suppose; no wonder she looks miserable."

"Not miserable, only bored."

"Well, it is the same thing. But, as I was saying, Captain Beresford is gambling shamefully, I hear. I only wonder he has time to go to balls; but then, to be sure, there may be attractions."

This she said in a mysterious manner, with

a furtive glance at Lady Rothley, as if to see whether she understood the hint, and would be offended at the suggestion it conveyed.

Lady Rothley, however, showed no signs, either of understanding the allusion, or of any desire to be enlightened, and took her leave soon after, Lady Katherine soliloquising as usual,

"There, I end as I began. It would never have done to give a ball the same night that the D.'s gave a dance to the Prince and Princess."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE next day all was confusion, of the kind so delightful to youthful spirits. To Evelyn especially the bustle and preparations were only one degree less enchanting than the ball itself; moving furniture, arranging flowers, having uncomfortable meals in odd corners, all this to her unsophisticated mind made part of the fun, and she was spared the worry which beset the others.

The Talbots went off to Putney at six o'clock in the evening, leaving the family to rest; but every ball-giver knows the impossibility of rest under the circumstances. Notes of excuse arriving from the most desirable; entreaties to be invited from the least desirable; the floor discovered to be sticky; the room found not to be light enough. Poor

Lady Katherine was jaded and cross, and her girls were worried; Evelyn alone was proof against fatigue and ill-humour. She flitted about, rearranged flowers, smoothed tempers, skimmed up and down the floor, as she said, to "unwax it," but probably because her feet *would* dance in unison with her spirits. How happy she felt! Lighting the candles on her dressing-table was a distinct pleasure; laying out her paraphernalia was another; the difficulty of getting hot water was enchanting; the difficulty of getting any dinner still more enchanting, as being all suggestive of the coming ball. The wise man says, "There is a time for all things," and truly Evelyn Talbot found it to be so; she was as thorough in her amusements as in her duties.

Very pretty and bright she looked, a few hours later, in a pale blue tulle costume given to her by her aunt; wearing no ornament but a few natural flowers, the mobile expression of her countenance reflecting vividly the feelings of the moment, which just now appeared to be that life's brightest hour was the commencement of a ball, that hour so miserable for the hostess! Then it is that servants placed at intervals shout the names, and alas!

invariably those only of one sex. "Mrs. and the Misses B.," "Lady L. and the Misses S." The seats are instantly pounced upon by gowns of velvet and brocade, surmounted by heads and head-dresses, sometimes of fearful structure. There were the grey-haired, the dyed-haired, bewigged, and bediamonded dowagers; there were floods of tulle and tarlatan and gossamer of all colours of the rainbow, their wearers striving each to be in the outermost row; and anxious consultations between mothers and daughters going on in whispers.

"Mamma, why have you stuck yourself here? No one will see us!"

"My love, do not let those rude S.'s push forward in front of you!"

"Mamma, there's such a good place empty near the door."

In answer to which last exclamation, the poor woman hurriedly waddles across, to find another waddler subsiding into the desired seat, which other, being her friend, has to pretend not to see she was making for it, while the discomfited dame, turning back, finds her former chair occupied. Meantime, the unhappy Lady Katherine was endeavour-

ing to look cordially delighted to see all the arrivals, even the most stupid, who appear invariably to come the earliest.

"Charmed to see you and your pretty daughters, my dear Mrs. C.! I cannot imagine what has become of all the men," she said; "Lord Q., and Sir Z. T., and so many more, promised to be early."

"Lord Q. is gone out of town, I know," answered Mrs. C., speaking with great alacrity; for she had asked to bring two nieces in addition to her two daughters, and had been refused. "I am so sorry, but there is a late House, and I fear you cannot count upon men to-night, for Mrs. G. has a little dance, and, you know, none of them can resist her suppers. I fear we shall have to leave you, to go there."

Surely, of all thankless offices, that of ball-giving bears off the palm.

Evelyn's countenance became more radiant as Colonel Malcolm arrived, and crossed at once to where she was standing, beating time eagerly with her foot to the strains of Coote and Tinney. But what was the use of striking up those tantalizing strains. Who could begin without partners?

The sprinkling of youths, who were by this time filtering slowly in, so tightly encased in shirt-collars that they were nearly incapable of speech, retreated to corners, looking as much the counterpart of each other as bullets fresh from the same mould, and evidently ashamed of being so early.

"So you are really come," said Evelyn to George Malcolm. "I feared you would not, in spite of your promise. Why do you hate balls so much?"

"Well, as I don't dance, and am not entitled by virtue of gout, or chaperoning, to a seat, I get pushed and hustled about, and feel very much in the way. Suppose you come and show me the rooms?"

With a beaming smile she passed her arm through his. Malcolm and she had become great friends, but he seemed pre-occupied to-night, and his manner had not its usual charm. After walking through the rooms, they were passing the head of the staircase, on their return to the ball-room, when a partner came up and claimed Evelyn for a dance.

Malcolm watched her face sparkling with enjoyment and with the cloudless happiness

of a heart at peace with itself and others, so different from the fevered and restless gaiety of those whose whole existence centres in the triumphs and mortifications of such scenes. He remembered her as he had seen her in the old Cornish village, when they walked home in the evening after she had left the dying girl, and he acknowledged to himself that here was the being who could still stir his heart to a warm and sincere affection; such love as, founded on sympathy and respect, would bear the test of this world's trials, and would grow deeper with the deepening experiences of sorrow and anxiety. It was not the same love which he had given to Agnes—that belonged to the past, and nothing could replace it in its all-absorbing devotion; but enough tenderness and affection remained in Malcolm's large-hearted nature to make his own happiness and that of another.

With these thoughts he turned from Evelyn's bright gladness, and his gaze lighted upon the Beresfords, who were just ascending the stairs. As he looked at Agnes, his heart smote him for having suffered his thoughts to dwell for one

moment on dreams of selfish happiness. She was more beautiful than ever. A dark shade under her eyes seemed to increase their size, and the languor of recent illness gave a softness to her beauty which added all that was wanting to its perfection. Her countenance had lost the scornful, dissatisfied look of old, and was replaced by a pathetic, enquiring look, as of one who, seeing others happy, seems to ask why she can never feel the same. Her whole appearance denoted passive weariness, perhaps, rather than active unhappiness. She did not care for her husband, had never cared for him, so the unsatisfactory terms on which they lived could not much affect her. But, and herein lay the source of her trouble, she had not one interest in life; and to some natures a colourless blank is more trying than a tangible evil, which can be recognized and fought against.

It was so with Agnes. To stagnate was the worst of all; and she looked back to the stormy passions of her childhood with wonder that she could then feel so keenly. Poor girl! Too soon she might be looking back with envy even to this emotionless life.

Presently her eye caught the earnest gaze of Malcolm, and a tinge of colour mounted to her pale face. He was wondering how much she knew of what was already upon people's lips as to her husband's proceedings; but her smile of greeting satisfied him on this point. He could read her every thought, though to others she seemed so impassive.

Malcolm had been absent from London for some weeks, and had only just heard the rumour which connected Lionel's name with that of Lady Eva Sinclair. He never attached much importance to idle gossip, but of Lionel's life in other respects he knew enough to arouse his worst fears, and he determined to see him, and, by assisting him out of his present money difficulties, to get a hold on him for the future, and endeavour to save both husband and wife from imminent ruin. But in the other matter, even if there were cause for alarm, he felt powerless. Lionel had all the obstinacy of a weak nature, and Malcolm could only hope that Lady Rothley would find some way to snatch her niece from the dangers that surrounded her. At this ball, however, any slight misgivings that he may have felt, were allayed.

Lady Eva was there, looking bright and happy, as no woman, he imagined, could look with a guilty secret on her mind, and she appeared also to be on terms of mere casual intimacy with Lionel. The most censorious could not here find food for scandal, he decided; but a more suspicious observer would have augured ill from the studious indifference of their manner towards each other. Malcolm joined Agnes as soon as she could escape from Lady Katherine's lamentations, and they passed into a small room where they could converse in peace.

CHAPTER XV.

MALCOLM'S time was much taken up with his professional duties, and it was from his brother officers that he had heard of Lionel's entanglements. Of Agnes he had seen little of late; but now he had grave reasons for fearing that sorrow was approaching her, and he longed inexpressibly to learn if she was at all prepared to meet it. He had always trembled for her, with her dual nature, so calm and impassive in the trivial worries of life, so passionate and rebellious when roused by sterner conflicts. What, he asked himself, would become of her, unsubdued by time, uninfluenced by religion, when brought face to face with the threatened climax? Yet, as he talked with her, he thought that he could discover a more tender light in her eyes, and

an unwonted gentleness in her whole manner, which he confidently trusted might be the token of a better state of things. The birth of her child, and the premature quenching of its short life, had been the means, perhaps, ordained by Providence for softening the mutinous element which was engrained in her character, and had hitherto so marred the happiness of her life.

"Tell me of yourself, dear Agnes," said Malcolm, "of your home, your daily life. I so grieved for your loss and disappointment. Lionel wrote me a nice letter about it, and seemed to share your sorrow."

"Did he?" answered Agnes, with indifference, "I didn't suppose he cared. Poor little thing, my life might have been different, had it lived. It would have been something to love, and to take an interest in."

"Hush, Agnes, I must scold you, as in the old Guardy days. I hope, dear," he continued, "you don't give way to these morbid ideas, and above all, when you are with Lionel?"

He felt he was treading on tender ground, but speak he must, and he went on,

"It cannot be pleasant for a husband to hear that his wife has no one to love, nothing to interest her, because the one little life is cut off."

She did not answer; and her silence distressed him, for it was the stillness of concentrated feeling, not of repose. He was unable to fathom her, for he believed that she had loved Lionel; what other motive could she have had in marrying him? And although her behaviour on her marriage day, and before it, had aroused some misgiving in his mind, he had heard of her during the past winter as being perfectly happy, and so she appeared to him when they met at Burly Lodge. He had expected a passionate invective, if she had any griefs against her husband, but he was not prepared for this stony indifference.

"Dear Agnes," said he, "you married the man you loved. You have friends, duties, pleasures; you must not really talk as if your life were over. God has tried you in the loss of your child, but you have so much besides. Do you see the Talbots often? I am sure that Evelyn's companionship must dispel gloom from any home," pointing to her, as

she passed at that moment through the room. Oh, the stupidity of men! Evelyn's face clouded as she greeted Agnes, whose response was equally chilly and uncordial.

"I can never understand you two," continued Malcolm, "close neighbours from your earliest youth, and you with no sisters, Agnes—"

She interrupted him, her eyes flashing.

"Friends are not made," she said, "by people happening to live within two miles of each other. We should never have suited; besides," she added, with sarcastic emphasis, "Evelyn's virtues are too exalted for me. You always speak of her brightness, Colonel Malcolm." Colonel Malcolm! Only once before had she called him so, and he started. "And you seem to forget that when people are worshipped, and have everybody at their feet, there is not much merit in looking or in being happy?" There was such concentrated bitterness in her tone as she uttered these words that Malcolm looked at her in bewilderment.

"I should have thought," he answered, "that if you two were to be compared, and it were asked who was worshipped, and had the

world at her feet, the answer would scarcely be given in favour of Evelyn Talbot. But," he continued in a graver tone, "I must ask your forgiveness for presuming on our old friendship, and taking you to task. The 'Guardy' has become 'Colonel Malcolm,' and I must pay more respect to Mrs. Beresford!" He spoke quietly, but sorrowfully, so sorrowfully that Agnes was ashamed of her petulance.

"Dear Guardy," she said, softly, "you can never be anything else to me, and as to your presuming—" Tears filled her eyes, and her voice faltered as she continued, "But you always speak as if I ought to be so happy! Surely my old home was not a very bright one for a child, and poor papa could never love me. There must be something," she spoke sadly, "that prevents anyone caring for me. You saw Lionel just now, dancing with Eva Sinclair." This was spoken in a way which convinced Malcolm that no shade of suspicion on that point had crossed her mind. "Of her, too, I used to see a good deal; we met constantly dining out, and she often went with me to the opera. She seemed so much better than the rest, never caring for

the conversation and tone of all those people. Oh, Guardy, it is all so different from what you would like! They talk of nothing but racing and gossip, and sometimes of things I could not repeat to you."

A gleam of satisfaction lit up Malcolm's face. Here, then, was the origin of the report. Eva had become a friend of Agnes's. How easy for an ill-natured world to misconstrue her friendship for the wife into a flirtation with the husband.

"That is very bad," said he; "but what a friend you can be to her, Agnes. Ah, it is not, as some people think, that visiting the poor alone is charitable work. No one estimates sufficiently the good that may be done in society by the example of such a one as yourself, and the distinct service you may render by drawing even one from the companionship of those you describe. Yes, Agnes, in a position like yours there is a wide sphere of usefulness, and you must not talk of being without interests."

"It is all very well to say so," returned Agnes, "but even Eva is a proof of what I say, that no one really cares for me. I suppose I bored her; at any rate, latterly she has

avoided me, and is always engaged when I ask her to come anywhere with me, or to take a drive. So, you see, I can't attract people. I am not like Evelyn," she added, looking suddenly up at him.

There was nothing, however, to be gathered from his countenance but the deepest concern, her last words having again aroused his fears. But he only said,

"Oh, there's no accounting for these things. Sometimes one finds oneself unable to see one's best friends. Lionel is looking fagged," he added; "has he been ill?"

"No, I think not. Poor Lionel!" she began in a half-pitying, half-indifferent tone.

"I don't think I should exactly apply that epithet to describe him," laughed Malcolm, after waiting in vain for the sequel to that remark. "I don't know anyone with more elements of prosperity, and he looks as if he appreciated them," for at this moment Lionel was standing in the pause of a valse, talking in the most animated way to his partner, and looking as if care had never approached him. "That bright face of his is as radiant as ever, though rather worn;" and again he doubted, for to Malcolm's conception, it

would be impossible for any to look thus unconcerned, if it were indeed true that he was on the brink of ruin, and leading the life that had been hinted of him.

After a while, Agnes slowly answered, "He is not always in good spirits, nor is his temper what it used to be." But, she added hastily, "I have nothing to complain of; he is always amiable to me, and if we don't suit, it isn't his fault. He should have married someone quite different, and one who—" She hesitated, speaking in quick, disjointed words, unlike her usually composed manner. "Yes, poor Lionel," she repeated. "Oh, Guardy, why did you let us marry?"

The pleading appeal escaped her involuntarily.

"Agnes! let you marry!—why indeed!"

It was his turn now to speak in the same abrupt way. The memory of that scene flashed across his mind in which he had tried to save her, and had been proudly repulsed, and now she reproached him, even as he had reproached himself, for not having persevered. What could it all mean?

"Agnes," said he in a startled undertone, "you must not give words to such thoughts,

even if you have them." As he spoke he passed his hand across his brow in troubled bewilderment, scarcely knowing how to proceed. "My dear child, do not give way to morbidness; try and make your home bright. The world is full of temptations for a man if his home is not made cheerful and happy. Remember, dear Agnes, that you have a great responsibility; that the happiness of his life and yours rests in a great measure with you."

He rose abruptly as he spoke, unable to control himself any longer. and suggesting that she might like some tea, they passed through the ball-room on their way.

Lionel was still dancing. He looked brilliant; his cheek was flushed, and it was with an almost unnaturally gay manner that he nodded to Malcolm, and, addressing Agnes, said,

"Are you going home? Shall I get you your carriage?"

"Oh, no, I will wait for you."

"Thanks no, don't wait. I shall just look in at the Turf before coming home;" and Colonel Malcolm saying that he would see Agnes to the carriage, they continued their

passage towards the tea-room. Not another word was exchanged between them.

Agnes was frightened at what she had said, and at the emotion it had evoked, and displeased with Malcolm for throwing on her the responsibility of Lionel's welfare; yet conscience told her that she had taken no pains to make their home bright and happy. What right had she to resent Lionel's intellectual failings? He had not deceived her; she had known what he was when she insisted on marrying him, and at least, he loved her sincerely and deferred to all her wishes. In sudden humility and self-condemnation, she exaggerated her own wrong-doing, the old nature asserting itself always in extremes for good or evil; and if she thus condemned herself for a negative deceit, how would she feel, what would she do, in the presence of actual wrong from Lionel? Well might Malcolm tremble for her.

CHAPTER XVI.

As time went on, the Beresfords drifted more and more into habits of separate existence. He had the ever-ready excuse of the House, which, with his military duties, as he assured his wife, took up all his time, and naturally kept him out till the early morning hours. They dined out occasionally, but the society in which he had hitherto delighted wearied her inexpressibly, and it was with pleasure that she found him less eager to accept the joint invitations showered upon them. It made her hope that Lionel's tastes were improving, and his mind turning more towards the serious side of life. She alluded to this on one occasion.

"I am so glad, Lionel, you care less about these tiresome dinners, and take more interest

in politics. I often go to hear the debates. Perhaps," she added with a laugh, "I shall some night hear you speak; it is curious I never make you out. Whereabouts do you sit?"

Poor Agnes! She had latterly tried, but utterly in vain, to bring some mutual interest into their lives, to associate herself more with his pursuits, as the influence of Malcolm was silently making itself felt. He was ever impressing on her that life is not for enjoyment alone, nor is personal happiness the chief end of existence, and she repeatedly made serious efforts, though but fitful ones, in the right direction, and as often was driven to abandon the attempt in despair. Thus gradually the distance between herself and her husband widened out. On this occasion, Lionel coloured with vexation, and, we may hope, with shame. He muttered something about those infernally dark ladies' galleries, and that where she sat she could not see him, and hastened to change the subject. There was a distinct alteration in him. The bright spirits and sunny disposition which had made his greatest charm, had died out. How could a man, deeply in debt, playing heavily, kept

from arrest only by his seat in Parliament, and in daily, hourly, expectation of a crisis which would oblige him to leave the army, and bring before his wife the disgraceful fact that he was gambling away her fortune—how could he be light-hearted? This was the terrible state of affairs, as utterly unsuspected by Agnes as were other phases of his life which, to her mind, would be far more disgraceful. His temper had become fitful, and he would often answer her roughly when, in her ignorance of what was passing, she would make some remark which grated on what remained of his sense of honour. Strange code, that code of honour among men. That he was deceiving her as to the terms upon which he was with her friend, and that he was imperilling Eva's reputation, scarcely affected him. There would some day be a "devil of a row," but it was all Agnes's fault; she was so cold and disdainful. As to George Sinclair, "why couldn't he look after his wife, and not neglect her as he did? What could fellows expect? However, though there was no harm in their friendship, people were beginning to talk, so he must draw back. That foolish little Eva took matters so

seriously. Why couldn't they keep friends and all that; and then her husband need never make a shindy." But though Lionel could take all this as a matter of course, and not feel morally much the worse, still, at times his better nature asserted itself, and any casual remark of Agnes's, as when she wondered why Eva had broken away from their former intimate relations, raised a passing qualm. For although he might please to put the intimacy between himself and Lady Eva on that light and airy footing, he was perfectly aware that neither Agnes nor Sir George would see it in the same light. This created an awkwardness, and as the feeling thus produced bored him, he avoided Agnes as much as possible, and she, on her part, ceased to struggle, though, strange to say, she liked him better in his present phase. It was more manly than his former brainless gaiety, and she had always the old undercurrent of pity for him; for assuredly he had given her his whole heart, of that she had never doubted, and she had married him without returning his love.

Malcolm's eyes had been opened of late, and he saw but too clearly beneath the sur-

face of the well-bred manner of each to the other. He knew that Agnes was unhappy, but he still believed that hers was the passive unhappiness of a woman without occupations, and without resources. He strove, therefore, to interest her in some of the many works of charity which were being carried on by Herbert Talbot, and to which he himself gave up most of his spare time; and, above all, to bring her into closer personal intercourse with Evelyn. With the stupidity of his sex, he blundered on, believing that contact with so sunny a nature would arouse Agnes from her apathy. Between these two, however, no friendship was possible, and Malcolm recognized with pain the estrangement that existed between the two women who were all the world to him, she whom he had loved with all the force of his manhood, and who was still so dear to him that to avert from her the terrible evil which was now imminent, had become the absorbing occupation of his life, and Evelyn, who in other circumstances he might have hoped to win. But we must go back to the night of Lady Katherine's ball.

CHAPTER XVII.

AFTER Malcolm had left the ball he had gone home and pondered deeply on all that had recently passed, and as to what line it behoved him to take. As a rule, he disapproved of interference between husband and wife; but, in this particular case, the Beresfords were so clearly sailing on a dangerous sea that surely he was called upon to make a bold and vigorous effort for their rescue. But how? Should he speak openly to Lionel, and gain his confidence? Perhaps there had been exaggeration. He was always extravagant, and had been reckless, both in borrowing and in backing bills for others, "getting up behind" in the jargon of the day; and this was all the more culpable as the money was mostly his wife's. Still, it

was the more venial error, and one that, savouring only of folly, might be condoned by Agnes; but then, about Lady Eva? Malcolm, however, could not believe harm of her; and, at any rate, that was too delicate a subject for him to touch. Lady Rothley was unfortunately out of town, but she would soon be back, and then her influence with her niece would probably avail to put an end to what he believed to be merely a foolish flirtation. His thoughts reverted to Agnes and her strange avowal, but to this he could not find the clue. What motive could she possibly have had in marrying Lionel? Her life at that time had been brightened; society had welcomed her, she was admired, and could surely have won the love of anyone she had encouraged. Why, then, had she selected Lionel, and been so bent on marrying him that she refused to listen to his, Malcolm's, advice and misgivings? He had wondered that she should choose one so inferior to herself; but, having so chosen, she now spoke as if she had never loved her husband, and he was aghast at her reproaching him for not saving her from herself. All here was hopeless gloom. To

steady a character so weak and facile as that of Lionel the influence of a strong loving nature was indispensable. If his wife did not care for him, and did not gain that ascendency which only a devoted affection could secure, then indeed what was there to stand between him and the temptations by which he was surrounded?

Such were Malcolm's reflections. There was not one thought of self. Poignant regret had been roused in him for a moment, as it half-dawned upon him that he had sacrificed himself in vain. But he would not allow himself to look back, and but one idea possessed him, namely, to arrest the downward course on which Lionel was speeding. His first act was to see him, and to endeavour to win his confidence.

"Considering the position I have always held towards you, you won't think me meddling," he said. "I know that you are in difficulties, and you must let me help you. You have now another to think of besides yourself; only tell me the whole truth."

He was startled at the eagerness with which Lionel grasped at the offer of assistance. Hitherto, in his worst scrapes, he had reso-

lutely refused even a loan from one to whom he already owed such gratitude, and who was not of kin to him. But now he poured forth his thanks with feverish haste, showing his readiness to accept any aid; and, to Malcolm's mind, nothing could have shown more clearly the deterioration in Lionel's character. There was in his manner a jaunty evasiveness, utterly unlike his old self; for, with all his faults, he had always been frank and honest-hearted.

Malcolm answered coldly,

"I leave town the day after to-morrow for a few days. Will you let me have a true and complete statement of all your liabilities, and I will see what I can do. But it will be on one condition, Lionel, your giving me your word of honour as a gentleman, that you will not again bet or touch a card."

With this understanding they parted, and some sort of arrangement was made which staved off ruin for the present. Lionel had not been himself that night. He had been for so long a time involved in difficulties that the natural consequence ensued. At times he drank more than was good for him, and without degenerating into a drunkard, he

alternated between moods of the deepest depression and the wildest gaiety.

The morning after his interview with Malcolm, remembering with shame and regret what had passed between them, he went straight to the lodgings of his old friend, and, with something of his former grace, he showed himself to be deeply penitent for his folly, assuring George Malcolm, and intending it fully at the time, that were it not for Agnes he would sell his commission and go off to the colonies, anywhere, sooner than receive monetary aid from one who had so often befriended him.

Malcolm was touched. He said a few grave words about Lionel's responsibility towards his wife, and of his earnest hope that he would start afresh in every way. He laid a deep stress on the words "in every way," but made no direct allusion to the other entanglements. It was something gained; and for a time things went better between the Beresfords. Malcolm frequently invited himself to dine with them; others were asked to meet him, and Agnes played the hostess with infinite grace and gaiety. Pleasant little dinners these were, and Lionel exerted

himself, and regained, in a measure, his former charm. Feeling sure that his presence acted as a check upon him, Malcolm went more into society, especially to the balls where he was certain of meeting the Beresfords, and he had always his place in Agnes's opera-box.

She seemed at this time to throw off her depression. People spoke of the improvement in her manner, and observed that she had become genial, and amused herself more than she had ever done before. Some merely wondered what could be the cause of the change; others, it is to be feared, invented an uncharitable solution of the enigma. She began also to take an interest in various charitable works. In what, indeed, would she not have taken an interest at Malcolm's suggestion? Yes, it had come to this, though no suspicion of it dawned upon her. Lady Eva might play with her conscience, and tell herself that she was indifferent to Lionel, knowing that he was the idol of her heart, but Agnes could never do so. Had she at this time known or guessed her love for Malcolm, she would have torn it from her heart as an accursed thing, and sunk in her

own estimation to a fathomless depth of degradation. However, no thought of danger warned her, and she gave herself up to happiness such as she had never known, and strove to be worthy of his respect, no longer as the child whom he had petted, but as the woman capable of appreciating his worth.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE improvement in the relations between the Beresfords was of short duration. Already the society which Agnes had gathered round her was, from various causes, broken up, and her life had become very dreary.

True, she was endeavouring to interest herself in the charitable occupations suggested to her by Malcolm, but where the heart is not in the work, where it is only undertaken to fill up the hours of tedious idleness, it becomes monotonous, and produces little good fruit either to the donor or the receiver. Malcolm himself was now so fully occupied that Agnes saw but little of him.

When Lionel chanced one day to be lunching at home, she reminded him of the

party that was to take place that night at M— House, adding that she had promised to chaperone Helen Toler, and hoping he would be able to accompany them. Lionel pleaded the "House" as an excuse, and seemed annoyed when his wife, contrary to her usual habit, pressed the point. He muttered something about an important debate, and that some "certain divisions" might keep him there all night, but he ended by promising to join her if he could get away, adding that he should at any rate dine at the House. His manner was ungracious, and Agnes's temper was chafed. It was rarely that Lionel opposed her wishes, but it must be said that she, on her side, rarely expressed any. She said no more, but having dined alone, and having called for Helen Toler, she arrived at M— House in no enviable frame of mind.

It was a crowded party, a species of entertainment Agnes most disliked. They had been kept a long time enduring the infliction of a "string," and she had been bored by the excited and unceasing remarks of her companion, who was in ecstasies at the prospect of meeting some of the Royal

Family, and of being chaperoned by so smart a woman as Mrs. Beresford.

Agnes good-naturedly stayed on to please her charge, while wondering what amusement the latter could find in being pushed about, and staring at people she scarcely knew by sight. If the truth must be told, she indulged a vague hope of meeting Malcolm, with whom she had what she called business, some questions about a charitable institution, and she especially wished to say that she had followed his advice in endeavouring to persuade her husband to come with her, a point on which Malcolm always laid great stress, notwithstanding his usual horror of interference. He now knew, which Agnes did not, that it was of great importance that the Beresfords should be seen together to put a stop, so far as might be, to the evil reports that were gaining credence as to Lionel's intimacy with Lady Eva, and consequently as to their own growing indifference to each other.

Malcolm, however, did not appear, and at length Helen Toler announced her readiness to depart.

Wending their way slowly down the stairs,

they with difficulty succeeded in getting into the cloak-room, and after having extricated their wraps, Agnes sat down in a corner to await patiently the blissful moment of the announcement of the carriage.

A group of young men near her were eagerly talking, one of them recounting a disaster that had occurred. As usual, Agnes, occupied with her own thoughts, heard nothing until one of them, turning round and seeing her, came hastily up.

"How d'ye do, Mrs. Beresford? Did Beresford tell you the narrow shave we had? But of course, now I think of it, you can't have seen him, as he went on to the supper. No one a bit hurt."

"No, I have heard nothing. What happened?"

She forced herself to speak in an indifferent manner, though it flashed through her mind that, at any rate, Lionel could not be at the House, as he had so emphatically declared he must be.

"Well, Beresford was driving the drag, and a huge van came round the corner and caught the wheels, but luckily a cart on the other side saved us from a smash. Some of

the ladies were frightened and went home, but Lady Eva and one or two others wouldn't give in, and went on to supper, very plucky of them I must say. We'd a very jolly party at Maidenhead, Mrs. Beresford. I was so sorry you could not come, but Beresford said you were obliged to come here, and I had to leave them early to look after my mother and sisters."

Meantime, one of the group of young men had approached, and was trying to attract the attention of the loquacious youth.

"There's Lady Dunsford and your sister looking for you," said he, pulling his sleeve, and endeavouring to make furtive signs, which were quite lost upon young Dunsford. He was delighted to have found a subject with which to interest the beautiful Mrs. Beresford, who generally cut very short his attempts at conversation.

"Tell my mother I'll come directly; go and call her carriage, there's a good fellow," said he, and was continuing his prolix narration when Agnes interrupted him, expressing in natural tones her sympathy for the fright they must have had.

She then turned to another man standing

near, and asked what was doing in the House, and why he, so constant an attendant, had absented himself this evening. Lionel, she felt, might be careless, foolish, but he was a gentleman, and therefore he would not tell a downright lie. He must have expected to be detained at the House, and at the last moment got away, but the answer to the question she had just put dispelled that illusion.

"Oh, nothing particular. It's not a Government night, you know, and there was a count out at seven o'clock."

Then Lionel had lied to her. That was the point, the details were immaterial. Agnes clenched her hand with rage, but her countenance betrayed nothing of what was passing within, except indeed to Malcolm, who came up at the moment to say that her carriage was next, and giving her his arm, he drew her hastily away. He had only just caught sight of her, having arrived late, but he had seen the dangerous glitter in her eyes, the look of concentrated passion, and though he asked no questions, he saw that something untoward had occurred.

As Agnes passed out of hearing, the young men resumed their conversation.

"By Jove," said he who had previously tried to warn his friend, as the latter returned somewhat crestfallen from escorting Helen Toler instead of Mrs. Beresford, a substitution of which he had not approved, "by Jove, I thought that this time you had indeed upset the coach, but evidently Lionel had told Mrs. Beresford about the party. By her look of astonishment at first, it seemed as if he had kept it dark."

"Yes, I suppose he had told her," said another, "but all the same, it's strange how she lets that affair go on under her nose. I should have thought her a woman to flare up and make an awful shindy."

"Oh, I daresay the Beresfords understand each other," retorted the discomfited youth, "and both go their own way. The fascinating Colonel no doubt consoles her."

"Shut up, Charley," exclaimed some of the men. "The Colonel's a right down good fellow and a sort of guardian of Lionel's. That isn't his line, and as to her, I'd stake my existence on that woman; she might break her heart, but she'd run as straight as a die."

Men of the world are more equitable in their judgments than is commonly supposed.

It is from the other sex that the cruel and scandalous rumours generally emanate, and though for obvious reasons they take care to shield their own particular friends and associates from censure, they would make mincemeat of the reputations of women whose pure lives are a silent reproach to their own, if by incautious conduct these happen to give any loop-hole or excuse for calumny.

Agnes went home in a tumult of wrath. Lionel's carelessness of her wishes was as nothing in comparison with his falsehood. She knew that most men are selfish. Had he spoken to her of his previous engagement she would willingly have excused him, for unhappily she was too indifferent to his presence to be otherwise vexed, but a lie, a thing so base, so unmanly, that she could never forgive. How well she remembered the discussions in former days between her father and Malcolm as to duelling. They differed, Sir Archibald insisting that the practice, although not to be justified in the sense of morality and religion, was yet the only means by which a man could defend his honour; Malcolm, on the other hand, maintaining that the honour was not worth having, which could only be

defended by defiance of the laws of God and man, and repudiating the idea that a man's truth could only be proved by standing to be shot at. But both were agreed on one point, they bracketted lying and dishonesty in common disgrace, and even Malcolm admitted that being accused of a lie would be the only, though a very inadequate, excuse for duelling. Agnes had yet to learn that a man might lie to his wife, to the wife of another, or indeed to any woman, without forfeiting the esteem of his fellow-men.

On the following day a stormy scene ensued. In her indignation Agnes did not spare her husband, and the cold, incisive words in which she expressed her contempt for his duplicity rendered any further reconciliation impossible. Her passionate invective, however, was directed solely against the subterfuge. To Lionel's astonishment, she made no allusion to the fact of the party at Maidenhead, or to that of Lady Eva's presence, further than by remarking that she thought it bad taste in Eva to join these parties without her husband.

To his wife's denunciations Lionel made scarcely any answer. In truth he was so

taken by surprise, so "flabbergasted," as he expressed it afterwards, that he could find no words of explanation or apology. For months past he had framed excuses; as he said to himself, "fellows always do."

Agnes had been too indifferent to probe him with questions, and he hardly looked upon these various pleas as being deceitful.

"A man," he argued, "can't be expected to account to his wife for each moment of his time."

Certainly Agnes neither demanded nor wished for such confidence. And now what on earth could he say? He knew her scornful contempt for falsehood and evasions, and —and Lionel stroked his moustache and fidgeted nervously about, but all in vain. There was no possible escape from its being a lie. Yes, according to her strict notions he supposed he had lied, but it was an ugly word to use against oneself. Another reason also kept him silent. He imagined that Agnes, in spite of her apparent unconcern, might start some awkward question as to Eva Sinclair. He was sure to blunder if he attempted explanation. For to do Lionel justice, he was not an habitual liar, and would certainly have

floundered in carrying out any specific deceit. He had all a man's sensitive honour on that point, so far as it goes. But then comes the miserable distinction. Where the other sex is concerned, and to some extent also in racing matters, there is a different and looser code. So Lionel stood crestfallen and speechless, and if anything could have increased Agnes's disdain, it was his sheepish demeanour. She had clung to the hope that he would in some way justify himself; at the least, that he would have indignantly repudiated the charge of intentional and deliberate deceit. As he was unable to do this, a bitter contempt took possession of her, which she was at no pains to conceal.

The alienation was complete, although for the present outward forms would be preserved.

CHAPTER XIX.

AFTER the scene just recorded, Agnes, though careful to keep up a semblance of cordiality in public, yet never unbent from the proud indifference of her attitude, from which Lionel did not attempt to win her. His downward course was fatally rapid. If he had not actually broken his word as to gambling, the spirit of the promise was evaded, and Malcolm found himself powerless to avert the inevitable catastrophe. Lionel, though supposed by his wife to be absent on a visit, was in reality in hiding. Who was to enlighten her? Who would look into that proud face, and dare to tell her that ruin and disgrace dogged her husband's steps, that the name she bore would be dragged through the mire, that he must resign his commission, and fly the

country? Strange to say, no suspicion of the truth had as yet broken upon Agnes.

Though living much in the world, she only saw it as a spectator, in its outward aspect; and certainly no one wished to enlighten her as to what passed behind the scenes. Lady Katherine, indeed, would sometimes allude to scandalous anecdotes, but Agnes seldom listened to her gossip, and nothing she said made the faintest impression on her mind, so that of the undercurrent of those whose lives she habitually saw, Agnes was as ignorant as in her girlhood.

Angry, and bitterly outraged as she felt, and fully determined to banish Lionel from the slight hold on her affection he had hitherto possessed, in her loyalty to him she shrank from disclosing, even to Malcolm, what she considered to be her husband's irrevocable dishonour. After all, he was her husband, the father of the little child she had mourned; and not from the lips of his wife should this miserable deceit be learned. It was for the lowest classes to pour forth their conjugal griefs, even as they love to display their bodily sores, but not thus should it be with her, not thus would it be with any noble, chivalrous souls. These

would endure in silence, and would hide alike the physical and moral ills that tortured them. A cloud had come of late between herself and Malcolm. He remembered the night at M— House, her troubled countenance, the arm that trembled on his own. He had gently asked her what ailed her, but she made no reply, and though he felt sure that some change had been suddenly wrought in her life, she had been studiously reserved, almost to the verge of shunning him. It was true. In her desire to shield Lionel she had avoided being alone with Malcolm, from whom she could not have concealed what she had sworn to herself never to reveal.

The crisis was at hand. The last few days had been passed by Malcolm in unceasing endeavours to avert, or at least to stave off, exposure for a time, but in vain. Lionel was beset on all sides. At length the matter reached the ears of the Authorities, and the utmost that Malcolm could obtain from them on Lionel's behalf was the permission to exchange into a regiment already stationed in India, and about to be moved to the front on the occasion of one of the expeditions against the Afghan tribes. Lionel grasped

at this proposal as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Finding that the influence he had once exercised was now powerless, Malcolm had for some weeks shrank from seeing the face of the boy, in whose fate he had such a deep interest. But now, when he came to offer him this last resource, some spark of Lionel's former spirit kindled in him, as he spoke of his gratitude, and of the hope of retrieving his position by hard work and fighting, or by his death of relieving his wife of the hateful tie which bound her fate to one so unworthy.

It is difficult to determine what had been Lionel's precise feelings latterly. He had thought in a vague manner that "it was all very hard on a fellow." He scarcely formulated the idea that a man may gamble away his wife's money and be unfaithful to her, may break the spirit of one proud woman and the heart of another fond one. He would not have propounded the notion in so many words, that this was exactly commendable; for all that, "other fellows often did the same, and people were not down upon them," and altogether it was hard lines. It was the right thing to dangle after somebody, women expected it, and everybody had a pal in his set.

If Agnes did the same, he would not have minded, but here Lionel stopped; no, he would not have liked it, and he did not even now care to glance at the possibility of Agnes being like the others. What would some of those fine ladies think if they could see through the worship of their admirers, and realize the true estimate in which they are held?

Meantime, Eva Sinclair hovered on the brink of the precipice. Too noble to remain under a husband's roof to deceive him, too weak to fly from danger while there was yet time, the hour had come when she was ready to leave her home sooner than betray the husband who trusted her. Her eyes were somewhat opened as to the conventional morality of those among whom she lived, and there were none to whom she could turn for advice.

The life she had led in common with her fellows was utterly demoralizing; late breakfasts, ride in the Park, luncheon parties, afternoon gatherings, early dinner for the play, party on the river, late supper, Epsom, Ascot, Goodwood, Homburg, Scotland, shooting parties, hunting parties, and back to the London season; a social treadmill, one would imagine,

but evidently, to themselves, containing all that life has best to offer. And, it may be assumed, seeing that most of these dames frequent churches, have their favourite preachers and their respective rituals, that they are satisfied that this sort of existence is a fit training for the eternity in which they profess to believe. They are given to descant on these subjects with great unction. "No, my dear, I can't stand lighted candles on the altar." "Oh! that I don't mind a bit, it has a meaning you know, but vestments; I stop short there." Many of these may be harmless by comparison, guiltless of evil intention, though equally guiltless of duties and responsibilities. But what shall we say of those, the leaders of this joyous band, who draw others into the same net, set the fashion, laugh at the "slow" ones, who have no special "admirers," whose conversation precludes the presence of young girls, and disgusts many of the better among themselves? In earlier times Eva Sinclair had shrank from the impure talk that drew forth peals of laughter from others, and she had been drawn to Agnes, in whose presence some check was put upon this license.

It was curious that Lionel, at this time, while sometimes bored at his wife being a wet blanket on their set, yet in his heart exulted in her superiority; but nothing is more common than this inconsistency. A man will applaud a broad joke, and be amused by a more than coarse story, assuring anyone who objects to the tone of the fair speaker that she's a jolly good soul, and capital fun, and what's the harm? But ask him if he would like his wife or sister to indulge in the same kind of wit? That would be another thing altogether. No, he would admit he would "pull his sister up in no time." There is no greater mistake than to suppose that men approve of this style; they may be amused for the moment, and encourage the sallies by their laughter, but in their soberer moments there are few who would not condemn it if they spoke their minds in sincerity. Yes, poor Eva! It needed but a slight impetus to impel her to her ruin. It came, in the shape of terror, for she too had heard that scandal was busy with her name. She dreaded that at any moment it might reach the ears of her husband, and sooner than face his wrath she would take the fatal step, and plunge from folly into guilt.

CHAPTER XX.

ON Lady Rothley's return to town, Malcolm called on her, and fortunately found her at home, and the Talbots sitting with her.

"So I hear you've worked wonders for the Beresford *ménage,*" said she, "and settled Lionel's affairs, as they call it, which means, I suppose, that you have crippled yourself to pay his debts! I know that you, as well as these good people, have heard all that's said about his flirtation with my idiot of a niece, Eva, else I would not mention it, but you had better know the truth; people exaggerate so horribly!"

"I rejoice to hear you say this, Lady Rothley. I have all along believed it to be mere gossip; still, don't you think it would be well to stop people's mouths? Once these

things get wind, they are difficult to suppress; and Sir George might object, not to speak of Agnes herself."

"Oh, as to George," retorted Lady Rothley, "he would only have himself to thank if the poor child got into any scrape. She is a dear, affectionate little thing, with no more brains than Lionel. I often wonder, if these two had married, how they would have got on, which of them would have chosen a house, or paid the bills? Though, to be sure, neither of them would have thought this last a necessary duty. But to return to George. I have no patience with him! He absents himself for weeks, leaving her in the care, God save the mark! of Lady —— and Mrs. —— and that set. You know what that means; and yet he'd kill her if he suspected her of flirting, and would certainly make himself very nasty to any man whose name was coupled with hers. I gave her a piece of my mind the other day, and frightened her out of her wits. I flatter myself she won't flirt again in a hurry."

Lady Rothley might well say she had frightened her niece. Eva had hardly dared to show herself since the lecture. She felt

that her aunt was ubiquitous, and might drop upon her at any moment; but alas, for her undoing, she had friends of the clan gooseberry, to whom she imparted her terrors, in whose houses she, "accidentally" of course, met Lionel, and into which no Lady Rothley could gain admittance, and the only result of her aunt's well-meant interference was to make Lady Eva confide her griefs and fears to Lionel, and to render them both more cautious. Lady Rothley, with all her cleverness, had overshot the mark. Perhaps with more gentleness and sympathy she would have drawn from the poor child a confession of her weakness, but in frightening her she had driven her for support and consolation into "the enemy's camp" as she called it, though with no grave suspicions as to the real state of her niece's feelings.

"Think," said Lady Rothley, "of the little goose saying to me, 'Oh dear Aunt Jane, everybody does the same, there's no harm in it; one must have a pal,' she began, but tried to turn it into 'friend' for my benefit. I told Eva in round terms what I thought of her friends, adding that, if I heard her name mentioned again in the same

manner, I should make no bones of enlightening George as to her amusements. Of course that was only a threat; I wouldn't do it for worlds, but I shall keep a watch over her, and if there's the least fear I shall carry her off with me. Poor little thing, she has no mother, nor anyone to look after her."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Herbert Talbot, "what a state society must be in!"

"Yes, possibly you are right; only, my dear Rector, don't please dignify it by the name of society. A small clique, noisy and reckless, push themselves to the front, and call themselves English society."

"That's true," said Mary Talbot. "There are hundreds of English homes where the women are all that we used to be proud of as the personification of English ladies; plenty of homes where slang is unknown, and such words as fast girls and frisky matrons would be simply Hebrew."

"But unfortunately," said Malcolm, "the bulk of our countrymen, as well as foreigners, take their ideas from this fatal set, call it by what name you like. I have been often taunted with the contrast between this hybrid

species and the type of which England used to boast, women who gave up dancing when they married, and lived among their children. I wonder that some of you ladies don't band together and check the advance of what, for want of a better word, I suppose I must call this fast set. There must be some among themselves, I suppose, who are drawn into it by circumstances, and are made what they are by bad example. Your own niece, for example. One cannot associate her innocent face with any thought of harm."

"No, poor child, nor is there any harm in her, I am convinced; but it is a dangerous position. The others play with edged tools very carefully, so as to avoid hurting themselves, but poor Eva, if her heart were concerned, would not stop to turn the sharp edge away from herself. As to banding ourselves together, my good friend, as you suggest, these same little ladies would desire no better than to get rid of us altogether, though occasionally at present they have to put up with our society. I can hear them saying, 'I suppose we must have Lady Rothley, as one has to dine with her sometimes, but she's awfully slow and correct, and gets worse

every year.' But, as you truly say, there is some real good stuff among them." They all laughed at the idea of the epithet "slow" as applied to her, whatever defects she might have.

"It seems to me that each individual must be accountable for himself," said Malcolm. "What one has a right to ask is, that, as a mass, they should behave in a seemly way."

"Like gentlemen and gentlewomen, as my old godmother used to say," laughed Lady Rothley. "No doubt human nature is the same at all times, but what is so disgusting now is that flirting and fastness are made the fashion; so that the good wives and mothers ape the ways of the bad ones, lest they should be shunted and ticketed 'dull and slow.'"

"Aye," put in the Rector, "that's bad enough, but another phase shocks me even more. I declare to you, though doubtless I should be said to preach up immorality if I expressed this opinion in public, that I blame the unhappy woman who, through weakness and under pressure of misery, goes astray, as they call it, as if their whole lives were not passed in going astray, infinitely less than I

detest those who, pluming themselves on their propriety, forsooth, delight in the impure and garlicky conversation, such as I am told is now the fashion of the day in the best 'quartiers' of London. Their minds are so thoroughly corrupted that conduct, with them, has become little more than a matter of accident or expediency; and as for the Gospel denunciations against this very sin, and the promised blessing to 'the pure in heart,' and not only in conduct, these texts, for all they know or care, might as well be extracted from the Koran."

"You speak like a book, my dear Herbert," retorted Lady Rothley. "Yes, it is quite true, and very sad and very bad, and the tone of our London world is going to the bow-wows as fast as it can, in proportion as all the old lines of demarcation between the pure and the impure have been battered down by the truffles and money bags of the foreign invaders. Where can a young married woman, in this our modern London, look for either example or support, except at the price of being basketed, or driven into an unsmart and respectable set? It is trying her very high, you must admit."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE Rothleys were established for the summer in their villa at Wimbledon. Lord Rothley had aged considerably since we first made his acquaintance. He had given up attending the meetings at the Carlton, and now occupied himself solely in what he called his private affairs, which consisted of attentively scanning all the military news of the day, with many and long intervening snatches of sonorous repose. He was even more tenacious than most men as to not allowing that he slept, and his good wife yielded to this weakness as she had done to all others. "Your papa was not asleep, dears," she would say to the children, "but he likes to shut his eyes as a rest, and then he breathes so heavily that one might fancy

that he was snoring." His opinions were now only brought forward as a kind of reserve force for great occasions, in the event of their movements needing explanation. Thus, it was he, of course, who decided that it would be better for Lucy that they should be at the villa this season, rather than in London. "Lucy is not strong, and she prefers country parties and lawn-tennis. Lord Rothley also wishes Helen to be with us for her confinement; he has a horror of country practitioners, and Wimbledon is so convenient, and within easy reach of the London doctors."

Though scarcely the luminary that his spouse, in part from policy, but more from genuine affection, was wont to hold him forth, Lord Rothley was nevertheless thoroughly conversant with military affairs, and his co-operation was of great use to Malcolm in the situation at which Lionel Beresford's affairs had now arrived. He had plenty of good sense as to matters within his ken, and together they decided on the course to be pursued. Though long in the narration, the events which had hastened the present crisis had occupied but a few days.

Mr. Maitland's advice and assistance were also at their disposal. Indeed, it was he who at length opened the unwilling eyes of Lady Rothley to the dangers which beset her niece. Edgar Maitland was an inveterate gossip in one sense, but not in the evil sense of that word. He probably knew more of the private histories of persons in London society than did their nearest relatives, but this knowledge was never used to their detriment; and many a reputation he had saved by sifting the evidence, and disproving the scandalous histories. He was bound to the Rothleys by ties of long friendship, and had watched with interest and, it must be added, with keen misgiving, the progress of the "affair" between Lady Eva and Lionel. But hitherto Lady Rothley had turned a deaf ear to his outspoken warning. As usual, she had numerous calls on her energies, and could not devote much time to any one person, unless that individual was in undoubted distress.

One morning in July, as she sat at her dressing-table, eagerly scanning a heap of letters and referring to a list of engagements on her tablets, with such running commen-

taries as these, "I don't much like the account of the governess for Susan—too young; nurse for Helen coming to see me at twelve, good character, if she's not too fine a lady; Lavinia's children threatening scarlatina. I can't go to her on account of Helen, but I'll send her old Hopkins. Why do the children of exemplary mothers have so many more ailments than those of questionable mammas? One never hears of their children being ill, and I don't believe their nurses and governesses ever give them any trouble! Nellie's boy broke his arm; there again, that wouldn't happen to an F. M. Nellie frets herself to death about her children, and of course, being the wife of a poor clergyman, she averages three in two years! Really, I think I shall have to give up all thoughts of matrimony for the rest; it's more trouble than enough, having the grandchildren added to one's cares. The agent to be here at twelve."

At that moment her maid entered with a telegram. She tore it open.

"Powell," she said, "run and order round the waggonette instantly."

This was the telegram:—

"Maitland to Lady Rothley.

"Come up at once; I fear mischief about E. S. Only heard it late last night—no time to lose. Will meet you before twelve in Grosvenor Square."

"Powell," as a violent peal of the bell brought that person back in great haste, "put up things for one night. I may have to sleep in Grosvenor Square. The carriage will be round in a quarter of an hour." Then she flew to Lord Rothley. "I haven't bothered you, dear, but I fear some trouble is brewing in the Sinclair *ménage*. I know you will let me bring Eva back if it seems advisable. In the meantime, not a word to anyone, please." It was now nine o'clock; she could reach Grosvenor Square before eleven. She looked in upon Lucy.

"I have to go to London, dear, about all sorts of business; possibly, if I can't see the people, I may remain all night. And by-the-bye, I will call at Eva's, and if George is still away, perhaps I can persuade her to come down here with her boy. She looked pale the other day, and it would be so nice for you. Have rooms ready, in case I bring her."

Lady Rothley never neglected the smallest precautions. If any danger of scandal was rife, it was an immense advantage that none of her daughters should suspect it; they could then talk so naturally of Eva's visit. "There is no such good plan," Lady Rothley used to say, "if you want your friends not to know a thing, as not to know it yourself."

She arrived at Grosvenor Square soon after eleven, and found Maitland awaiting her. He showed her a newspaper of the previous afternoon, in which had appeared a mysterious allusion to an impending crisis, involving two families of rank; and he added that, from what he had gathered, he feared there was foundation for the rumour, which pointed but too clearly to Lady Eva and Lionel. There was just the hope that Sir George might not see the paragraph, or that, with the obscure wording and his own complete unsuspiciousness, he would not understand it. But again, some kind person might enlighten him. For the moment, he was at his trainer's in a distant county, so they were safe until the morrow.

"If only your niece could be persuaded," said Maitland, "to put herself into your

hands; but I much fear, Lady Rothley, that I have good grounds for saying this, that she is more compromised than you think. Forgive me for paining you, but if Lady Eva has given her heart to this man, and if she is frightened about the newspaper report, there is no knowing what she might do in desperation."

Lady Rothley turned pale. Eva was nearly as dear to her as her own children, and if any harm happened, she would never forgive herself for her past obtuseness. She talked over her plans with Maitland.

"Trust me about Eva, if only I am not too late!" She dreaded that the weak and silly little thing might, in her terror, have left her home.

"I believe," said Maitland, "we have an ally in Lionel; he is entangled in other ways, and it is said, too, that he is in hiding. I only came back yesterday, so I know nothing for certain."

"Ah!" returned Lady Rothley. "Don't speak to me just now of all that misery for Agnes. I can't waste a moment in talking. For God's sake, go off at once, and get hold of Colonel Malcolm, and ascertain the where-

abouts of Lionel, in case—no, no!" she broke off, "that would be too horrible! Come back here as soon as you can, and wait for me."

The hansom she had ordered drove up, and into it Lady Rothley sprang with the alacrity of eighteen. On arriving at Grosvenor Crescent, she breathlessly enquired if Lady Eva was at home, pushing, however, past the servant, in case he had been ordered to admit no one.

"My lady not at home. She gone out," shrieked the French maid from the top of the stairs, in a tone of such suspicious anxiety that Lady Rothley drew a deep breath of relief, feeling now sure that Eva was within. She went quickly up, cutting short Julie's asserverations, and putting aside Julie's self, she at once entered her niece's dressing-room.

In the middle of the room stood Eva, her eyes dilated with terror at the approaching footsteps. As her aunt appeared, she sank on to the sofa, and covered her face with her hands. Lady Rothley closed and locked the outer door, and quietly sitting down beside Eva, she kissed her.

"Dear child," she said, stroking her head, and patting her hands affectionately, striving thus in the first instance to quell Eva's agony of fright, "I know all about it"—she hazarded this, knowing nothing for certain, but she felt it was the only chance of gaining her niece's confidence—"and I am here to help you, Eva. Nonsense, Eva," said her aunt, in a firm tone, as the other made a gesture of despair and a faint whisper of "Too late" reached her, "I do not now ask for your confidence, but you must clearly understand that I am not going to leave you. You must come with me, and put a stop to all evil tongues. Yes, I know," for Eva had drawn the newspaper from its hiding-place, "I have seen it, and for that reason I am here. I understand it all; you are terrified lest George should see it. But there is no fear; no report can reach him until to-morrow, by which time he will know you are safe with me, and you will have little Georgie with you."

She was ringing, as she spoke, to give the necessary orders, but Eva stopped her and fell on her knees, sobbing forth words almost inarticulate.

"You are not guilty of any sin, you say.

I believe you, Eva. Of nothing, that is, that you have brought yourself to call sin. Your dead mother might have taught you a different creed, but we will not discuss that now. Come, my child, you must control yourself, and let us keep Julie from suspecting anything."

Lower and lower sank Eva, and this time her voice was stifled, and Lady Rothley could scarcely gather the meaning of the few words that reached her, " Letter written—Lionel—expecting—answer."

Lady Rothley blanched to the very lips. It was worse than she expected; she had still hoped that it was a mere foolish flirtation, and that the state of extreme agitation in which she had found Eva was produced by fear of her husband seeing the paper. Her voice insensibly took a colder accent.

" Do I gather, Eva, that you have sent for Lionel Beresford, the man of all others that you should at this moment have avoided, the husband, too, of the woman who showered kindness upon you?"

Lady Rothley's indignation almost overcame her maternal instincts and her prudence, but severity would only terrify Eva into des-

peration. No answer came except redoubled sobs.

"My dear," she said, "you must come with me at once. I have an idea that Captain Beresford is away. But you will tell your servant that if he should call, he must ask him to come to my house to luncheon. That will avert suspicion. No danger of his following you into the lion's den," she mentally added. There came a knock at the door, and Julie's voice was heard asking to see her lady. Lady Rothley, making a hasty sign to Eva to be silent, opened the door, and took a note from the reluctant hand of Julie. "Here is the answer you were expecting, Eva," she said in a loud voice, and the perfect equanimity of her tone completely mystified the Frenchwoman. "While you are reading your note," she continued, in the same matter-of-fact tone, "I will give orders to Julie, for I am in a great hurry. You are to pack up Lady Eva's things," she said to the maid, "and go down to Wimbledon this afternoon by the five o'clock train. Lady Eva will follow with me. Now send the nurse." To that functionary, on her entering, she gave

orders that Master Georgie and the nursery-maid should be ready to drive down with his mamma and herself to Wimbledon that afternoon. She gently pushed the woman out of the room, saying there was no time to lose, and returned to Eva, from whom a faint cry had reached her. The change in her was startling. She was livid, and as she clenched the note in her hand, her face wore an expression of anger and contempt.

"What is it, my child?" whispered her aunt, her feelings of compassion restored by the agony she witnessed. No answer came from the white lips, only Eva pointed to the crushed note. "Shall I guess, dear Eva? You counted on the unselfishness of one who was ready to betray you to your ruin, but not to sacrifice his life, as you, so wickedly, were ready to sacrifice your own, and not yours alone, Eva! Had you no thought for your husband? Too heedless of you, I admit, but an honourable man, trusting in his wife's integrity—no thought for bringing shame and disgrace on his name and on that of your child! Did you think of little Georgie, who would ask, in after-years, why his mother was never mentioned? No

thought of that wife who was so kind and gentle with you? Eva, dear Eva, if the man's selfishness, for I cannot admit a higher motive, has saved you, be thankful for the mercy of God, which has so overruled it."

Eva's head sank on her aunt's shoulder, and she kept tight hold of her hand, as if she knew it was her only safeguard. Lady Rothley hastily formed her plans, insisting, meantime, upon Eva's rousing herself. She reminded her that her only hope of averting her husband's just indignation lay in her saving his name from open scandal, which was still possible; but for that she must exert herself, and resolutely repress all such outward traces of emotions as might be cited by her household or the world as proofs of her guilt.

Eva's fear of her husband effectually roused her to action, and by the time Lady Rothley's plans were completed in her busy brain, Eva was dressed, looking lovely, and with no more traces of the scene than might be accounted for by fatigue. All Lady Rothley's care now was to lull Sir George's suspicions. She spoke to the nurse, who had been long in the family,

and without telling her anything which she might betray in her very anxiety to conceal it, she clearly and impressively gave her, as the lawyers would say, her "Brief." Lady Rothley looked steadily and significantly at Mrs. Brian to rivet her attention, and spoke in a distinct voice, to be heard by any curious ears, the more the better on this occasion.

"I have hurried your mistress, so that she has hardly time to arrange anything; and I have undertaken to give the necessary orders. I promised Lady Lucy to persuade Lady Eva to come back with me to Wimbledon this evening, but she will not leave Master Georgie, so he must come too. I think, nurse, you had better trust him to us for a day or two, and you remain behind. Sir George might come back, as he often does, unexpectedly, and miss his letters. Whenever Sir George does return, see him at once, and he will tell you what he intends doing. We will call for the child on our way to Wimbledon, after his tea; and as to you," turning to her niece, "you must belong to me for the whole afternoon, for I have more to get through than I can manage. Are you ready, dear?" And Lady

Rothley, now restored to herself, whisked her downstairs and into a hansom.

"Hyde Park Corner."

"Dear Aunt Jane, where are—we—going?" said Eva, shrinking back into her corner. "Do let us go straight to Grosvenor Square, where I can hide myself from everybody."

"Eva," said her aunt, impressively, "I shelter you and save you on one condition—that you are to do absolutely as I wish. You have plenty of time for thought and repentance; you need both, and I should be the last to wish you to escape from either. But at this moment your husband's honour is in your hands. You must walk with me in Rotten Row. Hundreds of acquaintances will recognise you, and the vile newspaper calumny will be refuted. One advantage of the absurd fashion of carrying flaring scarlet parasols in the dog-days is that yours will effectually counteract your paleness. Now, courage, Eva, I trust you; you must be your bright self for the next half-hour. It is your first duty at present, for your husband's sake."

Never had Lady Rothley been so civil, as well to those she liked as to those she dis-

liked, of which latter class there were not a few. She astonished them by her urbanity. "We are just off to Wimbledon; my niece is coming with me. Sir George is out of town, at his tiresome trainer's. I hope we may persuade you to come down. It is charming just now, as are my strawberries, and we shall have a few people on and off. Ah! there is dear Lady A. How fortunate to have met you! We are on our way down to Wimbledon. Lord A. also away? These racing men are very trying to their wives, but Eva hopes George will join her." "And it is but a hope," soliloquized Lady Rothley, who by no means felt sanguine as to what view of the whole transaction might be taken by Sir George. He was a man thoroughly unsuspicious by nature, but, like many others, if his misgivings were once aroused, he was likely to make up for his previous security by rushing to the other extreme; he would never admit the plea of mere folly. Lady Rothley trembled in her heart, and would have been more severe with Eva if she had not felt that stern punishment awaited her, for after making

every allowance, Lady Rothley was not a woman to condone such wrong-doing.

Mr. Maitland returned after luncheon, and Herbert Talbot also came in response to an urgent appeal to him. He had been intimate with Sir George in their Oxford days, and though all intimacy had ceased when Sir George went on the turf, they had frequently met, and still retained a sincere regard for each other.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE London season was on the wane, its pulse throbbing with ever increasing fever as the moment approached for the yearly exodus, those terrible weeks between Ascot and Goodwood, when existence is driven at high-pressure speed, and everything "to be done" is considered possible save one, that of securing a moment's peace from the hurly-burly of excitement. How well it has been said that of all solitudes none is so depressing as that of being isolated in a crowd, and nowhere is this sense of loneliness more keenly realized than by those who, from the necessities of their social position, and by the pressure of their surroundings, are forced, against every instinct and inclination, through the maelstrom of an expiring season, to find

themselves whirled about in helpless despair among its noisy and boiling eddies.

These last few weeks had become to Agnes acutely wearisome. Her inner loneliness contrasted painfully with the routine of society around her, from the monotonous toils of which she could not entirely escape, though, from widely different motives, she and Lionel had each withdrawn from the throng as much as possible. Agnes, unhappily, had passed the phase of being simply bored with life, and had entered on the more perilous stage of chronic unrest, and of chafing against her fate; measuring time solely, if she had dared to gauge her conscience, by the intervals that elapsed between seeing or hearing from George Malcolm. She had drifted more and more into the morbid habit of day dreaming, and of abstracting her mind from the subject under discussion, while mechanically bearing a languid part in the conversation. In this dangerous faculty she had attained a singular proficiency. Among the few pleasures of her objectless and colourless existence, indeed, the only one that she thoroughly appreciated, was that of listening to a good debate in Parliament, and she had, fortunately, an

acquaintance who, feeling for the apparent isolation of her life, often procured for her this coveted enjoyment. In addition to the interest and excitement with which she followed the arguments, and was carried away by any bursts of eloquence, the remembrance which these called up of her youthful days, and of the absorbing delight she had found in listening to the animated discussions carried on between her father and George Malcolm, added yet a keener zest to the pleasure.

On one occasion, when a great passage of arms was expected in the House of Commons, she had dined early and had arrived while the Ladies' Gallery was almost empty, as she was anxious to secure the place she habitually occupied, a dark corner, where she was partly hidden from observation in the obscurity.

On the evening in question, she was esconced in her favourite place, some time before the main debate came on, and absorbed in her customary reveries, she scarcely perceived that the gallery was becoming gradually full, and she failed to take any special notice of those who entered. Round and round the old themes her thoughts perseveringly

wandered, as she asked herself with persistent iteration the ever recurring question, why had she married Lionel? Why had she rejected George Malcolm's warning? She recalled his words, aye even to his faltering voice, as he tried to pierce through the icy reserve in which she had entrenched herself. Why, when he tried to save her, had she thrown off his help in her angry self-assertion? Oh, God! why had she done it? Was it because she had loved him, and her mad pride had blinded her to the truth?

And now. . . . . Was she avowing, though only to herself, that she loved another than her husband? No, no, Lionel had not then been her husband, and, after all, her feelings for her Guardy had been but a child's affection for one she so revered, and who had roused her jealousy by his preference for another. At this point of her meditations, the fair radiant face and winsome smile of Evelyn seemed to pass before her, producing a feeling near akin to hatred. Bravely she strove to shut out the sight, and to force the current of her thoughts into another channel, and after a while they turned towards Lionel with less of bitterness than they had done for

many a long day. Poor Lionel! He, at least, had truly loved her, and if he had married another kind of woman, possibly he too would have been different, would never have stooped to deceit. He had certainly told her a lie, so it had appeared to her at the time, but could it not be that there was some explanation, which she in her blind anger had cast aside, and which a just pride had prevented him from forcing upon her? She remembered his anxiety in their early days to please her in all ways, the trouble he took to make himself agreeable to her friends, his kindness and attention to little Eva Sinclair, who was quite out of his line, for Lionel always preferred the society of the noisy ones, and Eva was not one of these. It struck Agnes, with something of remorse, that before he had left town he looked ill and worn, and that once or twice he had seemed desirous to speak, and that she had coldly repulsed him; possibly he had wanted to explain. She did not remember where he had gone, so little impression did his movements make upon her mind, but she made a sudden resolution that on his return she would give him the opportunity of a full explanation, and if she had accused him unjustly, she

would candidly admit her fault, and perhaps they might begin a new order of things; at any rate, she would make some effort to do so.

These, and many more such thoughts, utterly inconsistent and contradictory, as Agnes's musings habitually were, had been like the shifting glasses in a kaleidoscope tumbling on each other through her brain, while some prosy speaker was droning out his commonplaces to empty benches, and the members who were not tied by their official positions had gone to refresh themselves before the great speech of the night. For some time she had been dimly aware of a whispered colloquy carried on at a little distance, on the other side of a kind of partition behind which she sat. She did not at the moment recognise the voice of the speakers, nor did she listen to the conversation, but yet the purport of it, in a confused way, had made some slight impression on her brain. Mingled with her own reveries, there seemed to be some story of a betrayed wife, of a man who was a gambler and spendthrift, and of another woman, but it was all like the separate pieces of a puzzle. She had no clue

to its meaning, and had not, indeed, the least wish to understand it, but she was dimly conscious of a vague contempt for the befooled wife, who could be thus hoodwinked and suffer herself to become an object of pity to the world.

Suddenly the name of Eva Sinclair arrested her attention, and aroused a bewildered uneasiness. What part could Eva have in such a story? Almost unconsciously, Agnes lent forward to listen, when other names caught her ear, Lionel's, her own! The key to the puzzle was now forced upon her in all its hideous plainness, and every word that had been spoken became burnt into her brain, never to be effaced. With all conceivable exaggeration and invention, they embroidered the narration of Lionel's wrong-doings, and of his supposed *liaison* with Eva Sinclair. He had behaved disgracefully. There had been an awful scene; Sir George had got wind of the affair, had threatened to horsewhip him and to divorce poor Eva, only he could prove nothing, and Lady Rothley had carried her off.

"But in what way," asked one, "did Lionel behave so ill?"

"Why, don't you know, dear, having got her into the scrape, he backed out, and only thought of himself. It's better for her, in the long run, that's true. But he must be a heartless cur, for rumour connects his name, too, with that of Miss ——, of the —— Theatre. And then he gambles heavily, they say."

"I'm sorry for him, too," chimed in another. "He has gone to the bad very quickly. He used to be such a nice creature. How does his wife take it?"

"Oh, I don't know. The row only came off yesterday, and I fancy that Eva and he threw dust in her eyes, and that she suspected nothing; however, it must all come out now, and besides, he's ruined, and will have to bolt, they say."

"Poor woman! It will be an awful blow if she really suspected nothing. But then, she has been odious to him, and thrown him into it, and now people talk of—"

At that moment Bright rose to his feet, and a general movement among the occupants of the gallery, and repeated hushes putting a stop to the conversation, the speakers fixed their attention on the great orator. The one absorbing instinct of pride and of self-preser-

vation had kept Agnes rooted to her seat. Well for her that she was shielded from notice. If anyone had caught sight of her face, its ashy paleness, so different from the pure ivory life tint of her natural hue, the clenched hands, the knit brows, the lurid light that glowered in her eyes, while her small white teeth were firmly set—not all her efforts at self-control could have deceived them. For the moment all these efforts were directed to that end, her whole strength concentrated in the determination not to betray herself, not to see the pity in those women's eyes, to withdraw from their sight, anywhere, anyhow, so that they might never know their words had reached her. She had necessarily to pass before them in leaving her place, and as she had recognised their voices, she knew that they were acquaintances. How long she had sat she had no idea. Mechanically she looked at her watch. Her carriage must surely be waiting; but to leave while that eloquent voice was thundering forth its terse and fervid denunciations, this would surely betray her. How long had he been speaking? Would he never leave off?

Even in the turmoil of her brain, the magnificent peroration of those measured periods, clad in language of matchless purity and vigour, struck on her ear, though not a word of the sense penetrated to her understanding. At last—at last, amid a thunder of applause, he sat down; and now the moment had come to test her powers of dissimulation.

"I beg your pardon, Lady L," she said, "will you let me pass? My carriage has been waiting so long, I dare not stop for Disraeli's reply. How magnificent Bright was. Surpassed even himself; don't you think so?"

The place was dark, and her voice was unfaltering and silvery as ever. The tone of her voice was one of her greatest charms. The ladies made way for her, but could hardly answer her civilities coherently. The shock was so great of recognising her.

"Good heavens! what an escape! I am trembling all over. Think if she had heard us!"

"And how dreadful for her. She evidently knows nothing. My dear, if we had suddenly enlightened her, what an awful scene there

would have been. I wonder if it has all been exaggerated? Poor woman!"

* * * * *

Agnes got home, summoned her maid, and went through her toilet as usual. She would not omit one detail or shorten by a moment the process of brushing and combing out the beautiful long hair. Then she sat down with the utmost deliberation, and wrote a short note to Malcolm, begging him to come without fail at eleven o'clock the next day.

"Desire this to be sent the first thing in the morning," she said to the maid. "No, I want nothing more, thank you."

Agnes drew a long breath of relief as the woman left the room; she had been suffocating. Now she could think; now she could face her humiliation. No tears came to relieve her throbbing brain. The power of grouping her thoughts together was, perhaps in mercy, denied her; only the words she had overheard repeated themselves with dull persistency. She was a mark for the world's pity, her husband ruined, herself ruined; but that would have been nothing. She could have risen with all the force of her nature to

meet that evil if his extravagancies entailed no shame. But this shame, this black perfidy! Was it possible that she herself was that spiritless dupe, that cajoled wife, on whose credulity she had only just now cast such scorn, and that it was *her* husband of whom they had been speaking, a mere base profligate, with not manhood enough to stand by the woman he had disgraced? What had they said of him? That he was reported to have lavished his degrading passions on a yet baser object—no, not so; the baser one was she, whom his wife had befriended, and had tried to separate from the people surrounding her. Lionel knew this, and had encouraged their intimacy, and Eva had seemed grateful. Oh, then it was for his sake that Eva had pretended friendship for herself, and together they must have laughed over her stupidity, her blindness. But she wasted no further thought on Eva. All her rage was concentrated on the man whose name she bore, must ever bear, unless she dragged herself through the mire of the law courts to be freed; and but a few minutes ago she had been pitying him, and blaming herself for the disdain which she had been

unable, even then, wholly to repress. This was the man whom she had reproached herself for not being able to love; and now, could earth hold another so ignoble, so despicable as he had proved himself? She thanked God, in her wicked passion she dared to thank Him, that her love had been, nay, was now, given to one as far removed in worth from her husband as light from darkness. She avowed to herself this sinful love, nay, she gloried in it, though Malcolm should never guess that it was so. She must see him once more, and then she would leave England for ever. She had nothing to live for. Her little child slept peacefully in its tiny grave, and could never blush for a father's shame, never weep for a mother's humiliation! She was alone, and no one cared for her. Malcolm! Ah, no, he would not care. She clenched her hands in the agony of the thought. He would be happy, would marry Evelyn. A convulsive movement in her throat choked, almost suffocated her, and it was in this state of mind that she had summoned Malcolm to her side.

When Agnes rose the next morning traces of the agony of the past night were visible in

her drawn face and its pinched expression, but with proud decision she went through her usual duties, gave her orders, and suffered no signs of the struggle to appear in her demeanour. Then she passed into her morning room, and awaited Malcolm.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THERE was, in point of fact, "no harm" in the intimacy between Lady Eva and Lionel Beresford, as considered by the world in which they moved. Nothing as yet had passed between them to alarm what Eva had flattered herself to be a "conscience void of offence." He was only the recipient of her inmost thoughts, to whom she confided all her troubles, and especially her terror lest her husband should come to know of their . . . friendship. "George," she would say, "is so absurdly particular. He hates the very idea of my having any man friend, which is so awfully unfair." In general society, where, however, Lionel was now rarely seen, they purposely avoided each other. Little thought

Agnes, when she rejoiced in her husband's improved tastes, as shown by his no longer caring for what she considered to be dissipation, that it was not in formal entertainments that these frivolous souls delighted. No, they found their amusements in other and narrower grooves—parties on the river, parties to the play, followed by little suppers; parties anywhere and everywhere, so long as they were confined to their own set.

"Just among ourselves, you know, for we do not care for outsiders."

"Thank goodness," said one of the Sisterhood, "we're at least not censorious, like the people who set up for being so good. Why, an aunt of mine sniffed and snorted the other day about poor Eva, and wanted to know what I thought of her and Lionel Beresford. Such utter nonsense, and so ill-natured. I told her, what is the fact, that Eva is devoted to George Sinclair and her boy. She and Lionel are nothing more than 'pals,' and with that dreadful wife of his, who is enough to freeze one to look at, small blame to him for trying to amuse himself."

"But, I thought," suggested another of the community, "that Agnes Beresford was so

devoted to him. What a handsome creature she is."

"Yes, handsome enough for anything, but awfully stuck up. I'm not quite sure about her being so devoted to him as all that. People do say that she is going it with that good-looking George Malcolm, though they both look so solemn that, for my part, I believe they only talk about refuges and goody-goodies."

By the way, it may be observed that these merry matrons piqued themselves on being charitable, and never believing in evil, a handy creed enough, and one that suited most comfortably their elastic views of conjugal relations. But woe to a woman, like Eva Sinclair, who took things "seriously," as Lionel so pathetically bewailed, and who was occasionally troubled with the inconvenient appendage of a heart and a conscience. She and Lionel were thrown together and assigned to each other at every gathering, and, as a matter of course, nobody would dream of leaving out one, if the other was to be of the party. If ever a woman was impelled to her ruin, it was Eva Sinclair; yet even to their toleration there was a limit. Should Eva shrink from the crowning dishonour of remaining under

her husband's roof, while false to her marriage vows, should she prefer to sacrifice herself and her reputation and leave her home, rather than endure the scalding hourly shame of a life of faithless deception, then indeed the storm of virtuous indignation would burst upon her, and the acquaintances who had winked at the *liaison,* the dear friends who had encouraged it, would turn upon her with pitiless severity. This is tantamount to saying, though doubtless they would be shocked at being supposed to express it in so many words, "Be as guilty as you please, but within the bounds of conventional decorum. We have nothing to do with your conscience. Manage your little matters as best you can, throw dust in the eyes of your husband to any extent, but mind, you must not throw dirt upon us, your friends. We have our own reputations to protect, and we must indeed draw the line at open scandal."

There are among these good ladies, many gradations—many who are excellent wives, according to their lights, and devoted, after a fashion, to their husbands, to whom they are perfectly willing to extend the pleasant, and, as they deem it, innocent license, which they

permit themselves; women who are fond of their children to the extent of seeing to their being beautifully dressed, and of giving them the best of governesses and masters; but as for any personal training of their minds and morals, the tone and daily order of the mother's life renders that sacred duty all but impossible. Whether the children are altogether losers by this dispensation may be an open question.

About this time, some excitement was caused among the clique to which allusion has been made, by a sermon preached by Herbert Talbot. At one of their five o'clock tea gatherings the subject was discussed, with much animation, by some of the foremost among the critical bevy. Quoth one of them, "I do detest uncharitableness, especially in one like Herbert Talbot, who ought to know his Bible better than to be so unjust. It is positively wicked for a clergyman to be censorious. I should like to know what he thinks of that text which positively forbids one to think any evil." This was said with an air of great piety, and the rest shook their heads in sorrowing deprecation of the moral obliquity of their favourite preacher.

"I was not at Saint Jerome's last Sunday. Do tell us, Blanche, what did he really say? People do so exaggerate."

"Well, I don't recollect the exact words, but he was down on one all round, and, as far as I could make out, he said that one ought to think evil, and that one might just as well not run straight oneself as live with those who don't. Not these words, of course, but that was the drift of the sermon; and then he went on about our talking of subjects that we should not dare to speak of before our own mothers."

"Poor old dears, I should think not, indeed," broke in the first speaker. "How horrified they would be, with their old-fashioned notions. After all, they may, perhaps, be right, but one must go with the times."

In justice to our old friend the Rector, it may be as well to hear his sermon correctly quoted.

Lady Rothley had not failed to get wind of this gossip, and flew off to Mary Talbot.

"Now, Mary, you must tell me all about this famous sermon of Herbert's that has set all the dove-cotes in a flutter. The doves' feathers are all on end, and they are cooing

about everywhere that Herbert has preached up slander as being a cardinal virtue."

"How idiotic of them," replied Mary, with indignation. "You know Herbert's horror of shams, and how he does not mince matters. He thinks the way women, who pride themselves on their own virtue, are still ready, under the plea of Christian charity, to ignore almost every degree of immorality among those with whom it amuses them, or with whom they think it the smart thing to live in intimacy, is one of the most fatal poisons of the present day."

"Ignore indeed," exclaimed Lady Rothley. "Stuff and nonsense! There is no question among them of ignoring. They plead *des circonstances atténuantes* for the most notorious *liaisons,* as being, at the worst, but excusable indiscretions, that pet word of theirs, and maintain that the long duration of these peccadilloes is the apology for their continuance. One constantly hears of its being such an old affair that it has become 'quite respectable.' Oh, here you are, Herbert," continued Lady Rothley, as the Rector at that moment entered the room. "Come and answer for your sins; you cannot

imagine the sensation you have created by your sermon last Sunday. So I am to adorn myself with slander, in addition to all my cardinal virtues, am I?"

"It is in vain to pretend to paint the lily, my dear lady," replied the Rector, laughing. "I can guess, however, what you are driving at, from the way I have already been badgered about that sermon. What, in the name of fortune, do the people mean by saying I preached up slander? 'Thinketh no evil,' was my text," he continued more gravely, "and you must admit that it requires some ingenuity, not to say dishonesty, to pretend even to confound the tacit acceptance by these people of the barefaced and barely-veiled evil that is flaunted before their eyes, with that detestable and gossip-born suspicion of evil where none exists. It is all very well, their jibbing at these home-truths, but they know in their hearts better than I can tell them, that the more correct they are in their own lives the greater their responsibility for the fatal example they set in countenancing those, one might more truly say, making common cause with those who, while still on the safe side of the social hedge, are habitu-

ally and shamefully defying the most sacred of God's commands. I don't wonder at their being turned inside out when they are told that their life is, for the most part, one constant denial of Christ. Ah, I see by your pursed-up lips, my lady, that my words are too tall for your taste. But rely upon it, in the present phase of what, in spite of your protest, I must persist in calling society, when impure plays, impure talk, and more than questionable conduct is the accepted order of the day, it is not too much to say that Peter's denial of our blessed Lord was not one whit more treacherous, and infinitely less deliberate, than that of these people who, by word or gesture, by their silent acquiescence in impurity, by making His enemies their friends, by adopting and defending the world's standard of right and wrong in opposition to His word, and by consenting to the sins He hates, are, to all intents and purposes, herding with those who cried out before Pilate, 'Not this man, but Barabbas.' And now, dear old friend, that I have given you the substance of this dreadful sermon, I leave you free to side, if you can, with those who say that I preach up slander."

"Side with them? Yes, in one sense," she answered, laughingly, "for I would have given a good deal to have been by their side when they were under the lash."

"No," replied the Rector, in a serious tone. "No, not that, for who am I that I should venture to scourge my fellow-creatures? But one is at times carried away by an intense desire to persuade these people of their grave responsibilities, and to rouse in them the good that one would fain hope is but dormant through sheer thoughtlessness. Nevertheless," he resumed, after a pause, with one of his genial smiles, "though I don't plead guilty to lashing, I do to being as ravenous as a wolf, as I have eaten nothing since eight this morning; so, for goodness sake, let us go to luncheon."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE time had now come when it was needful that Malcolm should arrive at some decision as to his own affairs. We have rather lost sight latterly of the Talbots and of Evelyn, the calm tenour of their lives leaving little to chronicle. Malcolm passed most of his leisure hours in their home, but latterly a shadow had seemed to obscure the bright happiness which was its chief characteristic. There was an anxious look about Mary Talbot, and a restlessness in Evelyn, unlike their usual repose. Even Amy seemed disturbed, and instead of welcoming Malcolm with glad eagerness, she tried in her gentle way to discourage his frequent visits. He had not wavered in his determination of eventually winning Evelyn's love; but undervaluing his

own powers of attraction, he little imagined that he had already won it, a conclusion that was fast becoming clear to the perception of even the busy mother, and had long since been admitted by the sister, whose tranquil life enabled her to observe with the keenest interest all that affected those she loved.

In his many conversations with Amy Talbot, Malcolm had been at no pains to conceal from her his tender admiration of her sister. She could not but perceive how his face lighted up with gladness as Evelyn entered the room, and the eagerness with which he sought every opportunity of earnest conversation with her. Noting this, Amy never doubted that Malcolm shared the feeling which, to a sister's eye, was so palpable on Evelyn's side, for she knew Malcolm too well to fear that he would trifle with the affections that his unspoken words had called forth. He was therefore always joyfully welcomed, and though her respect for Evelyn's delicacy forbade any direct allusion to the subject, there was a perfect intelligence between the sisters. But as time went on, and the words were not spoken; as, latterly, Malcolm's visits became less frequent,

and they perceived that his brow was clouded and his aspect troubled, then slowly the light faded from Evelyn's fair face, and the sister first, and then the mother, perceived the change, and grieved for their darling.

In his presence, however, the innate dignity of the girl's nature enabled her to preserve her accustomed manner, and to Malcolm himself no change was apparent, though the mother and sister could detect a false ring in the gaiety which she simulated.

They believed in his truth, and they knew that Evelyn would not give her heart unsought. What, then, was the cause of his silence? Mary Talbot had ever lifted her voice against those who account it unmaidenly for a girl to yield her affections till the magic words were spoken.

"With what cruel inconsistency," she would say, "do you condemn a girl for accepting a man she does not love! You expect her, then, to remain indifferent, while he is stealing into her heart. If he is a true-hearted man, and asks her to be his wife, you assume that the love is to spring suddenly into existence, and in that instant to attain the proportions which alone justify a girl

giving her life into his keeping. Up to that moment he must be nothing to her; from that instant, all in all! While if the man is unworthy, though to her he has made himself appear as an angel, and if he has but sought her for the amusement of an hour, then the girl is to go on her way rejoicing, her heart untouched, and you will probably say she is a flirt. I have no patience with such injustice!"

A certain change in Amy's manner towards him had not been quite unnoticed by Malcolm. Kind and friendly she was as ever, for she could not mistrust him; yet a tinge of disapprobation, and an evident desire to keep him from Evelyn's side, led him to question his own conduct in this matter. If, however, he had erred, it was from an error of judgment only, for such love as he had to give had long been Evelyn's. The earnest desire of his heart was to make her his wife, and it was for her sake alone that he had hesitated.

Not that his old love for Agnes clashed with his present tenderness for Evelyn any more than the memory of a dead wife should pale and overcast the love for a living one. His only reason for pausing was his responsi-

bility towards Agnes and Lionel, a responsibility dating from those death-beds which had so haunted his memory, and culminating in the unhappy marriage which he might have prevented. This responsibility would exact from him a devotion of his time, inconsistent, as he feared, with the entire allegiance to which a wife was entitled.

Hitherto, he had considered the sacrifice as affecting his personal happiness alone, but now that the truth as to Evelyn's feelings was slowly making its way to Malcolm's mind, his course lay clear before him. Evelyn should decide. He would tell her of his scruples, of his former love, and of his present duties. There should be no question of concealment. Though his heart had once been given to another, and that other must ever remain an object to him of grave solicitude, with equal truth he could assure her that his tender affection for herself was profound and true, based upon the broad foundation of sympathy, respect, and admiration. If this love could satisfy her, and if she cared for him sufficiently to trust her happiness to his hands, it should thenceforth be his dearest care. He decided that he would

write to Evelyn; it would give her time to reflect as to whether such love as he had to offer was worth her acceptance. As he wrote his letter, his thoughts shaped themselves towards a peaceful and joyous future. A temporary separation might soften the heart of Agnes towards her husband, and already a plan for her immediate future had shaped itself in his brain. But while leaving the decision of his future with Evelyn, he would not desert Agnes in this dreadful crisis, for he knew that on him must devolve the terrible task of breaking to her the news which would crush her proud spirit in the dust, of which she was yet entirely ignorant, and for which she was absolutely unprepared. Not until that crisis was past, and some order brought into her life, could he contemplate happiness for himself, although he owed it to Evelyn to leave her no longer in doubt as to his feelings.

While he sat thus musing, he received a hurried note from Lady Rothley. He had been so occupied during the last few days in arranging Lionel's monetary affairs, that he had lost sight of the other complications, and had always hoped that these would prove to

have little foundation, but this note from Lady Rothley revived his worst fears. It was written in great haste, informing him briefly that there had been a miserable catastrophe involving Eva and Lionel, but that for the moment she had her niece safely sheltered at Wimbledon. She forebore to reproach Lionel, but warned Malcolm that means must be taken to inform Agnes, to whom chance might at any moment reveal the circumstances. She was at a loss to understand how it had been so long concealed; but the pith of the letter lay in the postscript:—

"I do not apologise for what I am saying. I feel certain that you know me too well to take my hint amiss, or to doubt my motives in telling you that rumour connects your name with Agnes as that of her consoler. With your high character and hers, you might well afford to scout the wretched calumny, but remember, dear friend, that with the majority who ignore evidence, any wicked gossip gains welcome credence."

In good truth, George Malcolm was being tried in the fire. One clear light alone shone out of the darkness. His marriage with Evelyn would stop the foul scandal, and it

would no longer be a desertion of his self-imposed duties, for even if he renounced the prospect of a happy home for himself, he could no longer be to Agnes as the Guardy of old. The many tongued voice of scandal would pursue them, and before all things, her reputation must be safe-guarded from the faintest breath of reproach. It was a terrible ordeal. He had put all aside for the sake of a woman into whose inner life he had never entered, in whose love he had never had a part. He had grudged no sacrifice so that he might redeem the pledge he had given, so that he might shield the woman he had loved, and might draw together the two objects of his solicitude, and now he stood face to face with the result. Lionel ruined and soon to be a fugitive, Agnes betrayed and outraged, and still worse, a sharper sting than all—her reputation, her proud stainless name imperilled by himself, who would have given his heart's blood to shield her from harm.

The next morning he finished his letter to Evelyn, in perfect assurance that the step he contemplated had now become as necessary for Agnes's welfare as for his own happiness, and he locked it in his bureau. First, he

must see Lady Rothley and learn the truth of these miserable stories; then—God help him and strengthen him for the task before him—he must see Agnes, and break to her the state of affairs as regarded her husband. Not until that interview was over would he send his letter to Evelyn and await the result. The thought of that intermediate scene with Agnes unmanned him, and his hand trembled as it had never done in the extremity of peril. As he was leaving the house to go to Lady Rothley, the note which, it will be remembered, Agnes had written on her return from the House of Commons, was put into his hand. He must see her at once.

CHAPTER XXV.

A HASTY ring at the door bell, a brief colloquy with the servant, the well-known step on the stairs, and Malcolm stood before Agnes.

As he entered, she was standing in the middle of the room, a crumpled newspaper in her hand, and on her face a terrible expression of passion, horror, and withering contempt.

Ah, the task he had shuddered to undertake had been performed by a ruder hand. He had no need to ask if she knew. One of those papers, degrading alike to the writers, the publishers, and the readers, had been sent to her, a scurrilous paragraph carefully marked, containing a garbled account of Lionel's delinquencies, and emphasizing with

shameful precision, and in terms not to be mistaken, the story which Agnes had overheard the previous evening. It was partly true, as Malcolm too well knew, but partly, as he still believed, false. Whose vile pen had worded it? Whose viler pen had marked and sent it? A further insult to the outraged wife. The fact of the paragraph having been eagerly scanned by the curious, the newspaper passed from hand to hand at the club, her affairs discussed by the travelling public, and herself held up to the pity of the world, had added a bitter drop to the cup which had seemed full, had planted an additional sting where no addition had seemed possible. Well as Malcolm knew every line of that face, often as he had seen it ablaze with passion, its expression dismayed him now. Involuntarily he stretched out his arms, as he was wont to do when in childish fits of rage she had flown to him, and he faltered forth the words he had used in those far-off days, "My dear, my dear, my poor, poor child." It was all his lips could frame. Her face was livid, as she clenched the paper in one hand, and pointed to it with the other, as if she could not utter the horrible words.

At the sight of his face, a momentary softness passed over her features, till the words of pity stung her to fresh wrath. Not even from him could she endure compassion. The tempest of rage burst forth anew, and she hurled forth against her husband a torrent of invective, of stinging contempt and loathing scorn. Yet through all, Malcolm could not detect one symptom of the outraged love which he had so dreaded to witness; for of the fact that she had loved Lionel at one time he never doubted, even if the love had proved too weak to survive his treachery. Her passion was terrible; in gasping and breathless accents the words came hissing through her clenched teeth, telling of what she had overheard the previous night, and of what she had but now read . . . . the paragraph confirming, with added virus, the story of shameful wrong of which she herself was the dupe.

At length her bitter words aroused Malcolm from the stupefaction which had held him mute.

"Hush, Agnes," his voice was almost stern, "I beseech you, do not say such dreadful things of your husband; you must

not condemn Lionel unheard. There may be exaggeration; a mere scurrilous paper, the gossip of women. You cannot, must not believe all that people—"

"It is true, it is true," she burst forth, interrupting him; "miserable fool that I was. He had already deceived me," she continued, "and I—I would not tell even you of his despicable lie. I screened him, because I bore his name, because—"

"Because you are a true woman, Agnes, and would not speak evil of the man you had loved, if even in your—"

"No, no, no," and again she vehemently interrupted him. "How dare you say it? Love such a one as Lionel? Oh," she wailed forth, and now an anguished accent rang through her tones, which they had not borne before, "that you, of all men, should think this, that you should believe I could have ever wasted one grain of love on him. I had laughed at his folly before I learnt to despise him for his falsehood. But I pitied him, because I thought he loved me who could give him no love in return, and I trusted him because I thought he was at least a gentleman. When I found out what he was, I still

struggled to hide my—" hatred, she might have added, but something in Malcolm's face arrested further words.

"Agnes, your anger blinds you to the truth; in calmer moments you will regret this wild outburst. Lionel did love you dearly."

Her eyes flashed.

"Never, never; my only consolation is the knowledge that he never cared for me. I believed that he did, and therefore I reproached myself. Thank God, that self-reproach is over."

"Agnes, Agnes," said Malcolm, in tones of anguish, and now utterly bewildered, for at last the ring of truth in her accents convinced him of what he had hitherto believed to be but the outcome of her fury. "What is it, then? What possessed you at that time? You chose him, you surely loved him?"

By a vehement gesture she would have interrupted him, but he went on,

"You married him in defiance of all I could say—"

"Don't remind me of that hated time, don't bring that day to my remembrance, or I shall go mad. Oh, Guardy," she went on

with quivering voice, "how could you let me marry him?"

Again that reproach. Malcolm winced in agony.

"Agnes, you have said this before, and I declare in God's name that I cannot understand you. I tried all that man could do, said almost more than I felt justified in saying, for I feared lest my own selfish feelings might have mastered me, and that the overpowering— Oh, God, what am I saying," he broke off, as he encountered her startled look. Ah! better had he stopped before the next question passed his lips. "Agnes, Agnes, why did you marry Lionel if you did not love him? Oh, what have you done with your own life—and—God forgive you, with—" Again he broke off. "I did not understand you then, I do not understand you now."

The tension was becoming too painful, even for his resolute self-command.

"No," she said, in a low, soft voice, through which there yet penetrated a strange accent of joy, "you did not, you do not understand; you ask me why I married Lionel." Her hands were clenched tightly on her heart, to still its beating, her

frame was convulsed with the effort to subdue the wild emotions surging in her breast, but even as the words were spoken she looked up to find his eyes rivetted on her, and she felt that her secret was revealed. In a resistless torrent her pride, her dignity, and womanly reticence were swept away. Betrayed by the man she had married, by the woman she had befriended, face to face with him who was all in all to her, whom she had loved unconsciously in her girlhood, innocently in her early married life, but now, when it was no longer innocent, with all a woman's passionate devotion, she poured forth wild words, avowing her love, reproaching him, her Guardy, for letting her marry, calling on him to bear her away to the world's end, so that she might be with him, and never again hear her husband's hated name. At last, exhausted with emotion, she sank on a chair, covering her face with her hands. Ah, good reason was there to hide that face. Alas, for the proud Agnes! her haughty spirit fallen so low, her womanly instincts so trampled in the dust! There was an awful pause. He stood like one stunned, his being shaken to its inmost depths.

The devil was lying in wait, and for one

brief moment there leapt up in Malcolm all the overwhelming love of his manhood. She, the idol of his life, she for whose love he had yearned with inexpressible longing, now avowing her own. All that he had dreamt of within his reach. A horrible temptation seized him, wicked thoughts flashed through his brain; some demon seemed to force into his bewildered mind a vile suggestion. Agnes might yet be his, his without a stain upon her name. If Lionel were disgraced and divorced, she might yet be his own honoured wife. Honoured! That word, thank God, turned the current of Malcolm's madness. If this were carried out, what henceforth would either Agnes or he have to do with honour? In the startling bewilderment of the moment in which her love had been revealed to him, Malcolm had let go the hand that had ever guided him. Now, he grasped it anew, and shuddered as he perceived the depth of the abyss from which he had been saved, and recognized that he had been on the verge of yielding to the tempter's voice, of bringing shame on the two whom he had vowed to protect, and of himself defying the God he served.

Quicker than these lines are penned, Malcolm shook off the hateful spell, and not for one moment did he question her purity. He knew it was but the frenzy of the moment, the frenzy of that ungovernable passion which he had always dreaded for her, and he believed, as he had ever done, in her perfect innocence. If he were scoundrel enough to take advantage of her momentary aberration, if even, ere it passed, she left her home to join him, he knew that she would not have remained with him one hour, that she would have loathed both herself and him, and died sooner than live in shame.

The very name by which she called him, the old childish appellation, did that not show that she had thought of him as her protector, in whose perfect honour and integrity she could place the fullest reliance?

Having mastered the torrent of emotion called forth by her avowal, Malcolm rose to the more solemn obligation of his duty towards her, his first care being to secure her against any suspicion that she had lowered herself in his estimation. The time had come for perfect confidence between them, but he had been sorely shaken and

could not trust himself to speak with befitting calmness of his past love; nor could he at this time allude to his coming engagement with Evelyn, though some words he let fall as to the friends upon whom she might count, prepared Agnes for that disclosure. He determined, therefore, to write, claiming her sympathy, for he believed that in her true affection for himself—so in his chivalry he put it—she would rejoice in his hopes of a peaceful future. Moreover, if she remembered her own wild words, she would hail with joy the certainty that he had not misjudged her, and for both their sakes the interview must not be prolonged. Steadying his voice, he at last broke the terrible silence, speaking in calm and measured accents. He dwelt upon her wrongs, and fully admitted their extent while pointing out that she had by her own hardness thrown Lionel into temptation, and cast from her with disdain his undoubted affection. Gently, patiently, he spoke, though his heart was wrung with the sight of her anguish, till the convulsive sobs which had shaken her frame subsided, and the delirium had passed.

Then, promising that she should hear from

him in the course of the day, Malcolm left her, and the innate truthfulness of her nature asserting itself, Agnes faced her own humiliation. She, the self-righteous one, harsh in her judgments, scorning deceit, and condemning others, she had been herself a living lie, unfaithful in heart to her marriage vows.

Ah, it needed this to humble her proud spirit; one ray of comfort alone pierced through the gloom, the hope that she had not betrayed herself to Malcolm. But had she not indeed done so? As this doubt broke upon her mind she started up, and covering her face with her hands, in very agony she strove to recall the scene. All power of consecutive thought escaped her; her mind could grasp nothing. The one only question pursued her, had she betrayed herself? Did Malcolm despise her? Round and round this point her thoughts persistently travelled. Anything would be welcome, any other misery, so that she had not sunk in his esteem. How was it, she asked herself distractedly, that she could not recall what had passed? Well for her, poor child, that she could not. Yet how safe was she in his hands, how safe from all shadow of blame or

misconception! But while condemning herself, she felt all the more bitterly towards Lionel, for if the sin of loving another, though unconsciously, seemed so heinous in her eyes, what must she think of one who had sinned openly, shamelessly? No, she would never forgive him or see him again, nor would she remain in London; but as to what plan might be decided upon for her she was indifferent, so that she might go far away out of reach. As her mind wandered to the other friends so pointedly alluded to by Malcolm, it suddenly forced itself upon her mind that he meant Evelyn, and that he would marry her. That, then, was the mysterious allusion that seemed hovering on his lips. She remembered some disjointed sentences—"a home to offer her later on, if she needed it." "Ever the first object with two who would so tenderly love her." "Brighter days would come to her, also." Also, yes—it was clear, clear as the sun at noonday, and the very poignancy of the pain with which this idea was fraught roused and nerved her, as meeting an enemy in the flesh would rouse one surrounded by ghostly terrors. Too well she knew it now. Love for Evelyn had been the guiding in-

fluence of his life. Agnes sat upright, and pressed her temples with violence, as if to stop the throbbing of her brain, for now, at last, she realized what she had done. Could it be that she had declared, if not in words—she could not recall any words—but had she revealed the secret of heart to him, who never had loved her, was perhaps now pitying and despising her? Remorse for her sin, jealous agony at his marriage, all would be as nothing if she could feel sure she had not been traitor to her womanly instincts. It was now one o'clock. By the evening she would receive the promised letter, with suggestions for her future. Meanwhile, she would write to him, and a kind of savage exultation seized her. Whatever she may have said in the passion of the moment, he should not any longer be left in the delusion that she loved him. Oh, Heaven, was it love or hatred that now possessed her? She would congratulate him, and frame such words as would neutralize the effect of any others she might have used. Going up to her room, she bathed her face in cold water, then looking at herself in the glass, she saw a paler, sterner reflection than she was wont to see, but yet nothing to

attract attention. She informed her maid that they would leave town in a day or two, and gave her orders with calmness and precision.

After writing her letter to Malcolm, she went down, as usual, to luncheon, and returning to her sitting-room, she tried to pass the weary hours by arranging all details for her departure. As to the extent of the ruin of which Malcolm had spoken, she was perfectly indifferent, and for the matter of that, she would willingly work for her livelihood.

Poor Agnes, more helpless than many a child, how unfit would she have been to grapple with the physical ills, the sordid cares of life, though truly her proud spirit would have faced any poverty. Once more her thoughts flew back into the old groove. Oh, how had she come to give her heart to one who had never cared for her? A flood of old memories darted through her mind. Surely he had once loved her in that far-off time. Had he not said so just now? What were his words? Even those had vanished, but she remembered a flash of joy sweeping over her as he uttered them. If she could have known that he had once

cared for her as she did for him, and if she had not betrayed herself, Agnes felt she could be happy yet, and even bring herself to rejoice in his marriage with Evelyn. She sat on until the sun's slanting rays reminded her that tea would be brought into the drawing-room, and though she had denied herself to visitors, she must keep up appearances before the servants. She went down, took out her work, and when the tea-tray was brought in, she saw at a glance that upon it was a letter, the letter. She did not seize it, as she longed to do, but gave some orders to the servants as to the arrangements of the curtains, the flowers, and other trivial details. Who does not know the feeling, the painful longing to read a letter, and then postponing the doing so from moment to moment? At last she was alone, and slowly opened the envelope. It was a long letter, of many pages. Agnes read it first rapidly, then more carefully, read, and re-read it, until no doubt could remain; then with a cry of passionate joy, she threw herself on her knees. He had loved her in the bygone days!

CHAPTER XXVI.

AS the past had risen up before him, Malcolm was stirred to his inmost core. All that he had striven so faithfully to crush down was again reasserting its power. It was as if the battle must be fought over again. For a moment he had been thoroughly unnerved by the sudden revelation that Agnes had loved him, that some fatal mist of error or pride, no matter what, alone had parted them.

He dared not let himself pursue this train of thought, and getting up, he resolutely took out the letter and read over again the words he had penned to Evelyn the previous night. To his unspeakable relief, he found there were none he could wish to alter. Thank God! the battle had been won, though

he would bear the wound marks to his grave. He was no stoic, but only a true Christian striving to serve his Heavenly Master, and though, for one moment, he had wavered, with no power, and, worse still, with no desire, to conquer, yet he was not forsaken by Him to whom his heart had hitherto turned in every trouble, sending forth a cry for help.

The help did not fail him in his need, though in the hour of his wild temptation he had for an instant let go the hand stretched out to save him. The aid was vouchsafed, and Malcolm was saved; and who was he, a strong man who had nearly fallen, that he should lose faith in the woman so sorely tried, and writhing under the direst insult, because in that supreme moment she had seemed to falter? No, he had not for one moment doubted her. Her love was of the past, as was his own, and she had but called on him, her old tried friend, for support and succour as she had ever done. To most men, the letter Malcolm must pen to Agnes would have presented insuperable difficulties; to him, it offered none. His own perfect rectitude overcame them. It was in keeping with his character that, had those

two letters been misdirected, there was no word in either of them that could have wounded the heart of her who should read it. The hour had come when the truth must be made known to Agnes, even as it was known to Evelyn. Not for one moment must she deem that her love had been unrequited. He told her all, of his love from its earliest dawning until on arriving, full of hope, on that bright evening in June, he had learnt that she was betrothed to Lionel; of his struggles with himself, of his doubts as to the advisability of her marriage, and that finally, when he had come to believe that the happiness of each was bound up in that of the other, he had resolved to stifle his misgivings, to conquer his love, and to devote himself to their service. By God's help he had been enabled so to do, and from that time no unworthy thought had possessed him. He thanked her tenderly and gratefully for the proof of her trust in letting him read the history of her past, and went on to speak of Lionel, imploring her to see him, and to forgive, as she hoped to be forgiven hereafter and as, in some measure, she required his forgiveness. In announcing his probable

engagement to Evelyn, and the motives which had hitherto restrained him from asking her to be his wife, he did not allow himself to doubt but that Agnes would rejoice in his thus securing a peaceful, happy future. Poor Malcolm! Truly he was unskilled in the reading of women's hearts. His own feelings for the two, though distinct, were in perfect harmony—the passionate, hopeless love of the past for one still dear to him in all purity and honour; the calm trustful affection for the other; perfect loyalty to both. Such was Malcolm.

After the first emotion caused by reading Malcolm's letter, and in the delirious exultation of learning that she had been beloved, Agnes felt almost happy. For the time, her jealousy of Evelyn was subdued, and she could even contemplate the marriage with composure. That she had not forfeited Malcolm's respect, or evoked his pity, was in itself sufficient balm to her wounded feelings. But soon a reaction set in. As she returned to the perusal of those words so loyal towards Evelyn, so resolutely thrusting his love for herself into the far-off past, yet breathing a high, chivalrous devotion in the present, she

set herself to read them in another and less worthy spirit, till at length, pressing the paper passionately to her lips, and murmuring, "Surely, surely, he loves me still! He may not own it; but his heart is mine, and mine alone," Agnes, who had turned with impatient contempt from the sins and follies of others, now hugged to her breast, with resolute defiance, that guilty hope. Where was now her self-condemnation? Where was her exultation in the virtue of the man she loved? Had she not said, truthfully facing her own fault, "I am guilty in heart if not in intent," and had she not gloried in the certainty of his integrity? At that time she would have spurned anyone who should have dared to tarnish Malcolm's honour, dared to say, "He loves you." Then she was jealous of his perfect uprightness. What had come to her now that she should strive to lower him to that level to which she had permitted herself to fall? It was, as of old, the outcome of her rebellious and undisciplined youth. Thank God, Agnes, that you are in the hands of a man who loves you better than you love yourself, who believes in you, and would sacrifice his life sooner than sully your

purity, sooner than have cause for doubting it. How many times did she read and re-read those precious lines, lines which he had penned to save her from the shame of believing that her love in the past was unreturned, not to call forth a guilty love in the present. Oh, God! no! For to debase Agnes, even in thought, would have been to him more intolerable than all the suffering he had endured. She read on, and again her mood changed to another, but scarcely a worthier one. He daring to speak of neglected duty, of herself requiring forgiveness, she so sinned against; he daring to suggest her seeing her husband, who had disgraced his name and hers. She lost sight of her own faults in battling against her first instincts of penitence.

"No, I never wronged my husband. I married meaning to love him, to be all that a wife should be. But his nature proved so base that mine revolted from one so paltry and unworthy? Yes, it was so. Not my fault, not mine throughout, but Lionel's. And he, George Malcolm, dares to bid me forgive, to bid me own myself in need of forgiveness!"

Revelling thus fatally in her pride and self-deceit, Agnes penned the words refusing to hold any communication with her husband. In all else she consented to follow the advice and guidance of others. She cared not where she went, nor what became of her, so long as she might leave London for ever, and at once. She asked no questions about Lionel; she did not wish to know of his destination or care to learn his fate. Such was Agnes.

CHAPTER XXVII.

LADY ROTHLEY had undertaken a most difficult task, the hardest and most difficult she had ever faced. She had acted on the spur of the moment, without counting the cost or giving herself time for reflection. Not that any obstacles would have, for one moment, deterred her from the obvious and paramount duty of attempting to save her brother's child, but she had not fully realized the probable consequences of her hasty action, an unusual omission on her part.

Her plans were always laid with precision, and even if her special project failed, she invariably reserved to herself an alternative by which it could afterwards be worked out in another form. Thus, when the square daughter insisted on sqeezing herself into the

round matrimonial hole, the square hole remained as a possibility for another daughter, and fresh mathematical and financial arrangements would be worked out in consequence; an enlargement of income to suit the curate's needs, a curtailment of adornments unsuitable to the curate's wife, more linen, fewer dresses, pony carriage in lieu of diamond earrings, struggles for a present living and a future Deanery, instead of searchings for a present constituency and a future Peerage.

In this instance, however, Lady Rothley had plunged into an undertaking of which she could not forecast the result. She had got her niece safe in her hands, but would Sir George, having meantime heard the rumours and seen the paragraph in the newspapers, would he consent to take back a wife whose indiscretion (to use no harsher word) had brought this scandal upon his name? Would he demand her back of the Rothleys, and insist on her being delivered up to him for castigation, or would he wash his hands of her, and leave her on theirs?

Lady Rothley felt that she could not harbour a wife against her husband's will, and neither could she, in her own children's

interests, permanently shelter a discarded wife. She did everything in her power to avert scandal, and to turn the shaft of malice. She invited the Talbots to Wimbledon, earnestly entreating them to accept the invitation. A clergyman was always a moral support. Few people were more respected than were Herbert Talbot and his wife, and few people's opinion would carry more weight. Mary was singularly unobstrusive, yet her shrewdness and the strong common-sense which distinguished her, her contempt on the one hand for the world's verdict on essential points, and on the other her unerring instincts that its mandates, as to outward proprieties, should not be disregarded, rendered her a very useful and safe counsellor, while her bright humour and sympathy made her a favourite with all classes.

"The Talbots at Wimbledon, you say? Are you sure? Herbert Talbot is not a man to condone a wife's misconduct for all the Lady Rothleys in the universe. And Mary Talbot too? Ah, then, depend upon it there can be no harm in Lady Eva. They are so particular," said a lady a few days after to a friend.

"No, I don't believe there is any harm; still I don't think the Talbot's presence proves it. They are so good and charitable, they wouldn't think ill of anybody; and besides, clergymen and their wives are of course obliged to go about among wicked people—it's part of their duty."

"But that's quite another pair of shoes. To begin with, the Talbots know too much of our world to be easily blinded; and though they would go amongst the wickedest people, as you say, to do them good, that is widely different from supporting people of their own class in their fashionable vices. No, no. You may be certain that if Herbert and Mary Talbot are meeting Lady Eva Sinclair on that sort of pleasant, social footing, it is because they are satisfied that the poor little woman is all right."

This form of comment had been fully foreseen by Lady Rothley, who neglected no imaginable means to produce the desired end. She showered invitations, utterly regardless of the capabilities of the Wimbledon Villa, and regardless also of her own predilections.

"They won't come," she told herself of the

majority of her invitees, "but they are inveterate gossips, and they will tell everybody that they have been asked to meet the Talbots, the Brydges, and the Sinclairs;" for she had boldly mentioned the latter couple as if their being together was a matter of course.

It had occurred to her that if his acquaintances assumed to Sir George that he and his wife were among the guests, it might go so far to persuade him that no valid reason existed why it should not be so.

"Well, George, up from Wimbledon, I suppose? So sorry we couldn't go. Lady Rothley seems to have got together a very cheery party. What a woman that is for making a pleasant house. My wife was in despair at having to refuse; she and Lady Eva are such chums."

It would be difficult for Sir George, when the first person he met, and then the second and third, made some such remarks, to mount his high horse, and to announce solemnly that he and his wife were separated through her misconduct. Oh, yes! Lady Rothley was innately canny, and she knew by heart her Pope on "Man."

> Created half to rise and half to fall;
> Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;
> Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled,
> The glory, jest, and riddle of the world!

Two days after Lady Eva had left home, a hansom thundered up to the door, and Sir George vaulted out, turned his latch-key, threw an unnecessary fare to the driver to avoid all possibility of dispute, and got himself, he hardly knew how, into his own room. To pounce on the letter, which he was sure must be awaiting him, before he was seen by his servants, was the first impulse of the moment. What he had heard, how he had heard it, by whom and with what exaggerations and additions, need not now be considered. Suffice it, that it was clear by his actions that he expected the worst, and looked to a letter from his wife to explain her flight.

"D— the women, with their fair faces and false hearts!" thought Sir George.

Needless to say, he found no letter. Lady Eva had written, indeed, though in a very different strain to that which he expected; but her letter, together with Lady Rothley's warm invitation, had followed him about from the trainer's to Newmarket and back again,

and had not, therefore, reached him. It was strange that the mischievous letter had done so—a further illustration of the old adage; for if ill news flies apace, still more swiftly, we may be sure, does meddling malice wend its way.

"Ah! she had not pluck to write, pluck enough to disgrace me and the child, curse her!" exclaimed the infuriated man; and he seized his hat, intending before another hour had passed to rush to his lawyer and commence proceedings for a divorce. In his hot wrath an unworthy thought had flashed across his mind, to glance off it as quickly. "She shan't have a divorce. Curse the innocent, plausible-looking face that hides her black heart!" he had said, bringing his fist down with a thump on the table that shook the house. "That's what she wants—to marry the d—d cowardly hound; and I can't fight him—shoot him through the heart, which he deserves. I can horsewhip him though. A divorce! Not I! No; she may live on in disgrace—go to the devil for all I care."

In proof of which he suddenly broke down, and the man sobbed like a child. A trifle had done it—a toy of little Georgie's lying on

the floor, recalling the vision of the dimpled, laughing-faced mother, when Georgie was still but a baby, and she had loved him! Yes, he was sure that she had done so then, as he had always loved her—had looked forward to seeing the bewitching little fairy welcoming him back; and the first thing he had thought of after a "good week" was some sparkling jewel to adorn that well-loved Hebe face. Ah! that was in early days; but of late how had it been? Had she welcomed him back? Or had he been too much wrapped up in his own pursuits to notice or to care whether she welcomed him or not? A long, deep groan broke from him, and deadened the sound of a repeated knocking at the door, which had now opened, admitting the rotund person and placid face of Mrs. Brian.

Sir George started up in a fury. Who dared to intrude upon him in that private sanctum? Only one had ever been so privileged, and that memory flashing across him, clothed with the certainty that never again could those happy days return, but augmented his wrath. The scowling countenance, the concentrated bitterness of his tone,

as he harshly demanded her business, offended the nurse, accustomed to the friendly manner due to a faithful, trusted dependant. Her scared face of distress, in reality due to astonishment at her reception, appeared to Sir George confirmatory of his worst fears, if, indeed, they had needed confirmation; but the nature of the communication he had received would have left little room for doubt even in the mind of one whose vital interests were not concerned, and who could therefore have weighed the evidence coolly and impartially.

"I beg your pardon, Sir George," stammered the nurse, "but my lady—"

"Do not name her; I forbid it! If you have any letter for me, give it me at once."

His voice was so hoarse, so broken, that Mrs. Brian scarcely understood.

"Her ladyship wrote, sir, and Lady Rothley, she—"

"Lady Rothley!" thundered Sir George. "Then she knows; but of course," he muttered with a groan, "all the world knows by this time. Mrs. Brian," he said, "if you have any message to deliver, pray do not delay; if not, I must beg you to leave me.

I will make all arrangements and let you know. Now send me the child, and leave him with me till I ring."

He dreaded the sight of his boy, yet yearned to see him.

"Master Georgie!" exclaimed the nurse, surprised. "He is with his mamma at Wimbledon, and she desired me to join them if she stayed on; but her ladyship said if you, sir, are not going, they would be coming back, of course."

Mrs. Brian still spoke rather confusedly, and Sir George stared at her in a bewildered manner.

"Master Georgie with his mother—and—at Wimbledon? Do pray, my good woman, explain what you mean—what it all means. Do not, for God's sake, stand staring like that. Can't you speak?" he went on, with rising anger, as the nurse stood still.

The offence of being called "my good woman" added to her bewilderment. Sir George, in spite of his fierce temper, was always courteous to his servants, though he now felt tempted to fly at Mrs. Brian and shake the words out of her. His only lucid idea was that Lady Rothley had interrupted

his wife's guilty flight (nearer the truth than he would ever know, it was to be hoped). But then the boy—how dared she take him with her? He sat down and strove to speak calmly; he could not brow-beat a woman in the nurse's position.

"Mrs. Brian, I cannot understand why Lady Eva is with her aunt, and why you are not with Master George. I must beg you to give me an exact account, as far as you know."

It would be agony to the proud man to listen to the story of his wife's shame from a servant; but she evidently knew what had passed, and he must endure the humiliation.

"Sir George," said the nurse, with cold precision, her dignity still ruffled, "Lady Rothley came on Tuesday morning and wanted her ladyship to go back with her to stay during your absence, but my lady would not leave Master George, who has not been well lately; and so Lady Rothley said he might go, and I was to follow with more things if they stayed on, and that, Sir George, was to depend on whether you went to Wimbledon or my lady came back; and I was to ask you this when you returned.

That is why I intruded, sir. My lady, leastways Lady Rothley I think it was, said my lady was writing. That is all I know, sir;" and the nurse, who had been edging herself nearer to the door as she spoke, quietly opened it and withdrew before Sir George had time to interpose.

"'My good woman,' indeed," growled Mrs. Brian, "after twenty-five years in the family; Lady Eva's own nurse, too, and brought her up, as one may say. I never heard the like. Sir George looks like a madman. We always heard he had a temper before my lady married him, but to me he has always been civil; what's come over him? 'Good woman,' indeed. I never ought to have let Master Georgie go without me, and then I couldn't have been so spoken to."

Such were Mrs. Brian's soliloquies, but she was too good a woman to utter them aloud. Her employer's interests were her own, after the good old type now nearly extinct, and if she had any suspicion that things were going wrong, not the united curiosity of housekeeper's room, hall and pantry, would have wrung a word from her. When she had left the room, Sir George

sat on in a maze and entanglement of thought, impossible to describe. On the one hand the woman had spoken naturally, there had evidently been no *esclandre,* and what could be more likely than that Eva should pass the few days of his absence with her aunt? On the other hand, and Sir George started up, his face working convulsively, there was the cursed paragraph. His thoughts swaying now one way, now another; love, in spite of himself, for the dear little wife, remorse, in spite of himself, for his own neglect of her, vowing vengeance against all the world if they had misjudged her, vowing still more terrible vengeance against herself if she had deceived him, he was in a chaos of doubt as to what to think; what to do.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THOUGH boldly announcing that the Talbots would be among her expected guests, grave doubts had suggested themselves to Lady Rothley's mind as to their accepting the invitation.

They had, as Lady Katherine called it, and as Lady Rothley well knew, "peculiar ideas" on these subjects, which did not fit in with those of the majority.

Had Lady Eva returned repentant, humble and homeless, even after an open scandal, they would have received her in their own home, comforted and sheltered her; but they would assuredly not uphold her if her object were merely to keep her place in society by blinding her husband. Herbert held that it would be wrong, even if it were possible, to

conceal from Sir George the circumstances which had imperilled his wife's good name.

Whatever the degree of her guilt, she had given him ample cause for resentment, and she was bound to confess her errors, and to seek his forgiveness.

The Rector offered his services to mediate between them, but not to assist in hoodwinking Sir George, and he desired to see Lady Eva, so as to be the bearer of some message from her to her justly outraged husband. Lady Rothley felt herself to be on the horns of a dilemma. By this time she was convinced that the scandal would have reached Sir George's ears, as the paragraph which had caused the mischief had found its way into other papers; but at least he need never know how near her poor Eva had been to ruining his life and her own.

"After all," she argued with herself, "it was not even keeping back the truth, for probably Eva would have shrunk at the last moment from taking the fatal step," while if the Rector were to visit Eva in her present state of mind, she would be certain to tell him the whole truth, and he would urge full confession to her husband. A proper and

unimpeachable theory, but, thought Lady Rothley with a sigh, in practice it would not work with George, for even if he ultimately forgave Eva, he would half-kill her with his violence, and he would never forget, or allow her to forget, that another man had held his honour in his hands. Poor Lady Rothley! The fates were against her. It was not her fault if "unimpeachable theories" would not square with "convenient practices," and how could she carry through this matter if nobody would be amenable? It seemed to her that everybody was playing at cross-purposes. The Talbots would not come because they erroneously believed that Eva was happy and defiant; Eva was almost broken down from combined terror and remorse, and already her own daughters were beginning to suspect that something was amiss. The Tolers were coming to spend the following day at the Villa, for Lady Rothley, in her unfailing prevision of worldly expediency, had determined to secure, by the retaining fee of an invitation, the services of Lady Katherine's folly.

"The woman is such a fool that she will stick firmly to the first version she hears,

especially coming from me, and she is such a gossip that she will spread it over London within one hour of her return there."

But this visit would be a severe trial to herself. Lady Rothley was well-nigh at her wits' end; what if Eva would not "show at luncheon," and if Herbert continued obdurate? On one thing, however, she was resolved. He should not see Eva, and she carried that point triumphantly. The culprit deserved severe punishment, but hanging would be nothing in comparison with confession to Sir George.

Lady Rothley straightway went up to town to beard the Rector in his den. She described in moving terms the state of remorse and misery in which she had found her niece, omitting, of course, to mention the fatal intention which was, so she had taught herself to believe, but a momentary impulse. Dwelling on Eva's penitence, and on her terror of her husband's wrath, she so effectually wrought upon the Rector's soft-hearted sympathy for anyone in genuine distress, that he promised to see Sir George on his arrival, and to do all in his power to soften his just indignation.

"Get him to come down to us," said Lady Rothley, beseechingly. "Tell him that no one suspects Eva of any harm. Do prevail with him to see her at our house, before he takes her home."

But this Herbert would not promise. He would not assert that there was "no harm." Far from it, there was very considerable harm, and Lady Eva must submit herself to her husband's will, and be thankful if he consented to receive her back. With this concession Lady Rothley was forced to be content, but before she left she extracted a promise from Mary that she would come to Wimbledon on the following day, and meeting several acquaintances on her way home, she descanted on the great pleasure it was to her to have the dear Talbots at the Villa.

Lady Katherine and her daughters duly arrived on the following morning, and while the latter joined the younger members of the party in the cricket field, Lady Rothley armed herself for the encounter she had challenged. On the whole the prospect amused her. There was a ludicrous mixture of importance, mystery, and compassion in Lady Katherine's manner, which plainly in-

dicated that she had heard rumours and believed them, and that she was fully impressed with the weight of her own responsibility, for Lady Rothley would of course be very grateful for her advice and sympathy under the distressing circumstances. Lady Rothley was determined to mystify and befool her.

Lady Katherine assumed a *visage de circonstance,* and with a compassionate air, she began,

"I need hardly tell you, dear Lady Rothley, how much I have felt for you. Poor Mrs. Beresford too. I always feared she would have a fall. 'Pride' we know," she ejaculated, piously, "'goes before a fall.'"

"No doubt," said Lady Rothley, cheerfully, "though I don't quite see the applicability of the quotation in this instance. Ah, yes, I see now, you mean about Lionel Beresford's debts. Yes, that is a bad business, but he, at any rate, was never proud, poor fellow."

"Ah, yes, his debts; but I had forgotten about them. With the large fortune Mrs. Beresford will inherit, that is of less consequence, and need not have led to a separation. But the other matter—it's too terrible—and I

feel so for you, the more so that you have been like a mother to her."

"Oh, no," said Lady Rothley, purposely misunderstanding, "although I knew her father so well."

"What does she mean?" thought Lady Katherine. "Knew her own brother so well."

"Strange to say," continued Lady Rothley, "I never saw Agnes till she was grown up."

"Ah, but I was not speaking of Mrs. Beresford. It's a delicate subject to touch, though of course you could not be expected to feel the same for her as for your own daughter. And if only open scandal could have been avoided, and that poor Lady—"

"Poor Lady who?" demanded Lady Rothley, her plan being to draw the enemy into the open, and then to annihilate her, leaving her no retreat.

"Ah, how kind you are to stand by her, but you can trust me. Now if it were Herbert, he is so obstinate, and he never cares about appearances. He thinks, you know, that it does not so much matter what people say, as—as—"

"Oh, I see, he thinks it of more consequence to be good than to seem so; is that

it? Well, that certainly is unusual," with a mischievous twinkle.

"Yes, that is it. Now I was so sure you would view these things in the light of common-sense. Those theories of Herbert's are excellent in their way, but they do not answer in practice."

Lady Rothley was considerably startled to find her own casuistry thus appropriated by Lady Katherine, and, moreover, it did not sound so well, enunciated thus in its primitive form, as it had appeared when mentally manipulated and squared for her own use. Perhaps it might be wholesome for us if some of our dubious reasonings, so nicely fitted and polished up to suit our especial needs, were to be thus crudely expressed in their primitive shape by the Lady Katherines of our acquaintance.

"And now," said Lady Katherine, plaintively, "let us look into this matter and settle what is best to be done. I should think even now, if she could be got back—telegraphs are so useful in these affairs—that it could perhaps be hushed up."

Lady Rothley assumed an air of the deepest interest.

"If what could be hushed up? Oh, do explain, I should be so glad to hear your views; but Lionel Beresford's debts are, I fear, a matter of notoriety, so I don't see how the subject can be hushed up."

"Ah!" shaking her head compassionately, "I was not alluding to the debts, but to the separation—the double separation, for I suppose Mrs. Beresford —"

"Separation! But how can Agnes go with him? All soldiers on active service have to leave their wives behind; and then you spoke of double separation. I can't follow your meaning."

"But, dear Lady Rothley, you must have read that paragraph in the ——, which said that —"

"I never read those vile papers," said Lady Rothley, in a tone of lofty virtue.

"Ah! but when it concerns people one knows, and affects them so terribly, then it becomes so interesting—I mean, of course, so sad. But there, as I always say, men will be wild, and as long as they keep it quiet it does not matter—that is, I mean, not so much; but when it comes to being in the papers —"

"I wonder, Lady Katherine, that you read

papers of that sort, or take any notice of their contents, whatever you may now be alluding to." She added the last words with a certain qualm of conscience.

"Ah, I understand; you mean as long as there is no open scandal one need not mind the immorality, for, as I say, men will be men"—("And fools will be fools," mentally ejaculated Lady Rothley, who felt that she had nearly reached the limit of her patience) "but when it comes to women one must draw a line somewhere; but, dear Lady Rothley, if I could help you by noticing her, if she is got back eventually—for of course with young girls of my own—"

"Now I am thoroughly puzzled," said Lady Rothley, with a droll air of utter bewilderment. "Help me by noticing whom?"

"Alas, I can only be speaking of poor Lady Eva, for even though one must severely blame, one can't help feeling for her."

"You're too kind; but why should you feel for Eva? I don't know what you mean by blame. The little boy is quite well again; I think he is out with her now at the cricket field. No, by-the-bye, she is gone upstairs to finish her letters."

"Gone upstairs? Lady Eva?"

Lady Katherine was dumbfoundered, having firmly believed up to that moment that Lady Eva and Lionel were on their way to the South, as announced by the paper in question.

In the midst of all Lady Rothley's anxiety, she enjoyed the spectacle of the enemy's discomfiture, as she proceeded to fire another shot,

"I wonder what train Sir George will come by."

She said it naturally, and as if she were not torn by doubts as to whether he would come, now or ever.

"Sir George coming—Lady Eva—" Lady Katherine gasped, and beads of distress gathered on her forehead. What had she herself been saying? Could the story possibly be untrue, and had she irretrievably offended her hostess? Evidently not, for the latter was so pleasant in her manner. What a mercy that Lady Rothley was rather obtuse, and did not understand things!

At that moment a servant appeared, bringing two telegrams, one for Lady Rothley and one for Lady Eva. Lady Rothley, with studied

indifference, opened the one addressed to herself, and told the servant where he would find Lady Eva.

She rattled on, though burning with anxiety to learn the contents of the other telegram. Soon after, Eva's own maid crossed the lawn with the orange-coloured envelope, and said that her mistress would be glad if Lady Rothley could come up to her room.

"Busy packing already, I suppose?" said Lady Rothley, when she had read the telegram. "How tiresome; Sir George can't come down after all, and sends to Eva to go home. He might have left her to me for one more day. These devoted husbands are very selfish. However, no doubt Eva is longing to be off, so you'll forgive me for leaving you, I'm sure."

Lady Rothley had decidedly given herself a holiday from that perfect truth on which she generally prided herself. Her visitor remained in a state of agitation and distress, pitiable to behold. She had not recovered sufficient presence of mind to send a message to Lady Eva, and sat wringing her hands in helpless perplexity.

But Lady Rothley thoroughly understood

the woman she had to deal with. Had she told the story to Lady Katherine as she wished it to be repeated, the latter might probably have reproduced it nearly verbatim, but accompanied by so many ominous shakings of the head, and sighs, and other signs indicating what a different tale she *could* tell, that as a matter of fact her championship would have further illustrated the adage, "Save me from my friends."

It had, however, come about quite naturally. The tangible presence of Eva, who by all the laws of probability should ere this have reached some Byronic spot devoted to the concealment of illicit affections, and the opportune arrival of the telegrams, converted her into such an undoubting partisan, that she was able to assure the Talbots, later in the day, that there never had been the least question of any thing between Lady Eva and Lionel. He wanted to be in the thick of it wherever there was fighting, and dear Agnes was so proud of him, and so anxious he should distinguish himself, and as for that disgraceful newspaper report, she knew for certain that Lionel and Agnes had laughed heartily over it, and that she and Lady Eva

were devoted friends, "you know, and always have been."

Such were the few immaterial additions which were added by Lady Katherine, in perfect good faith.

Lady Rothley found her niece in a pitiable state of fear. Eva's love for Lionel had been made up largely of vanity, fostered by opportunity, and probably still more by pique at her husband's neglect. It could not outlive the heartlessness of his conduct, as she deemed it, in leaving her to pay the penalty of what he had brought upon her; perfectly indifferent as to whether her name was blasted, and her home shut to her.

She had loved her husband truly, after her own fashion, but love in her partook of the weakness of her character, and now intense terror paralyzed her energies. In piteous accents, she besought her aunt not to send her back alone, wishing to temporize, to do anything, rather than adopt the one only straightforward course. Lady Rothley, in her sorrow for the girl, seemed to have laid aside her judgment as well as her principles, but the appearance of the Talbots put a stop to all further vacillation, as the Rector,

who had just come from his interview with Sir George, insisted, in firm and unwavering accents, that Eva must bear the consequences of her own conduct.

After a terrible scene of tears and hysterics, she was at last induced to return to her home.

Lady Katherine took her leave after tea, having gathered sufficient courage to send an affectionate message to dear Lady Eva, who, she hoped, would never hear of the absurd rumour that had been flying about, and she then announced her intention of going at once to visit Mrs. Beresford.

CHAPTER XXIX.

LADY ROTHLEY drew a deep breath of relief as Lady Katherine drove off, and, linking her arm in that of the Rector's wife, she said,

"Now, Mary, come up to my room and let us talk it all out together, until Rothley releases Herbert. I am dying to know from him every detail, but meantime darling Eva is safe, if, indeed, she has not died of fright. You can scarcely imagine the relief it is to me, after these two days of anxiety. Who can believe that all this misery could have been compressed into two days? It seems like months. I had put off all business to devote myself to Eva, and now I feel like a schoolboy on a holiday. We will enjoy ourselves."

"With all my heart," said Mary; "but

tell me what you said to Katherine. She announced to me gravely that the whole story about the Beresfords was from first to last a fabrication."

Lady Rothley burst out laughing.

"Capital," she said. "Better than I expected. Oh, I can hear her! And now listen;" and she smoothed out her gown and mimicked her to perfection.

But when she had finished she looked up rather distressed at the gravity of Mary's countenance.

"Don't look so shocked, Mary; I did not mean to offend you. I have a great regard for Katherine, but I can't help seeing the droll side of people, and she is so quaint."

"It is not of Kate that I was thinking; she lays herself open to ridicule. But it passes my comprehension, Jane, how you, to gain any end, can stoop to tell such—"

"To tell such tarradiddles, you mean," answered Lady Rothley with an amused twinkle. "I did no such thing. I did not say that Agnes was devoted to Lionel, and fond of Eva, or that Eva and George were happy together, only—"

"Only," interrupted Mary, "you wished

Katherine to take that impression, and you wanted her to convey it to others. Forgive me, Jane, if I cannot see the difference."

"Now, Mary, I call that narrow-minded, not to say straight-laced. You would not have me proclaim poor Eva's follies?"

"Certainly not, but proclaiming and denying are very different things."

"Possibly I may have said too much, but Katherine provoked me by her patronising ways; she actually talked of some day noticing Eva. I wish you could have seen her face when she found Eva was here. It was a caution! And indeed," she continued in a graver voice, "I feel a sort of remorse for not looking after that poor child. The example and encouragement of those people she lived with are enough to demoralize any young creature. I ought to have warned George."

"But surely," said Mary, "among them, there are good women; Agnes herself, for example."

"Yes, but see the difference. These women are clever enough not to show themselves up before such women as Agnes, who was not really intimate with them; but they

can mould a silly little thing like Eva to their own pattern. The talk, especially among the younger ones, is such that if I, or any older woman, appear, it is instantly dropped, and too often it goes on even before men."

"It was the reverse in our younger days," said Mary; "there were some of the older women only who allowed themselves that disgusting privilege, but they stopped whenever any of the younger ones appeared; nasty old creatures, we used to think them."

"Even they did not go the lengths that are tolerated now. There were a few notorious ones among them, as there always are, who think that handling unsavoury topics is a proof of wit; but what riles me is that the well-behaved, with their pretty baby faces, talk, or at any rate, listen, with amusement to allusions and anecdotes, which would bring a blush, possibly a very becoming one, to our old cheeks. These are the women who do the real harm. No wonder that men confound our world with the half-world, and treat one pretty much as they do the other. Small blame to them!"

"I dislike, especially," said Mary, "the horrid example to young girls. They hear the

laughing at the half-whispered joke, but are told that they can't join in the fun until they are married; as if taking upon them the holiest of vows was to exempt them from all womanly modesty."

"Very soon," said Lady Rothley, "we shan't be able to find husbands for our girls. The younger sons go to America for their wives, and the elder ones are monopolized by the F. M.'s."

"The what?"

"Oh, my dear," laughed Lady Rothley, "that was a slip of the tongue; but as these worthies have come into existence, the F. M.'s and the P. B.'s, there must needs be a name for them, and slang is catching."

"I don't know," answered Mary, "that there is any moral harm in slang. If the present generation prefer awful—jolly—stunning—to our old words—glorious—beautiful and lovely, it really does not matter, though all the same it would be rather convenient to have a new edition of the slang dictionary; but as to finding the husbands as you call it, there's one advantage, thank goodness, in being a parson's wife; one is kept out of much mischief, and at any rate one can't

develop into a scheming London mother, though we may have proclivities that way on a small provincial scale."

The conference was abruptly broken up by the entrance of the Rector.

"Well, Herbert," said Lady Rothley, flying to meet him, "what did George say? Is he very angry? Will he bully my poor little Eva? How did you manage? Why did you not get him to come down here, instead of the wretched child going up to be alone with him? I do hope you made the best of it, slurred it over to him, so that he won't be savage."

"I certainly did not slur it over; and on the whole, I think Sir George has behaved admirably. Of course he is angry, more than angry, indignant and outraged that the wife whom he trusted should have played with her good name and endangered his honour by her culpable folly, to call it by no stronger name."

Lady Rothley breathed again, for it was evident that he did not know quite all, or he *would* have called it by a stronger name. How lucky she had prevented his seeing Eva!

"He has no right to talk much after neglecting her as he has done," she said.

"Sir George is quite aware of his own faults. It was his blind trust in your niece, however, that gave her the liberty she abused. Surely, you must wish the lesson to sink deep. I cannot wish otherwise for her than that she should suffer deeply, and it is far better that she should go to him than, forgive me, dear Lady Rothley, than that she should be petted here and set up as a victim."

"You are unjust to me, Herbert," said Lady Rothley. "I was most severe with Eva, and I do hope and believe the lesson will sink deep, but George had no right to neglect her as he did, and to throw her, a mere child, into the intimate society of people, whom he knew, or ought to have known, would undermine the principles of any girl. I hope it will be a lesson to George as well."

"Yes, I think and believe that this will be a new beginning for both," said the Rector.

"But I have not done with you. When you came in, Mary, and I had been having a long argument. It's all very well to say she hates argufying, but she has developed into the most obstinate and contradictory creature I ever came across. Now, I know you'll take my part and say it is the duty

of mothers to wish their daughters to marry well."

The last word slipped out unawares, and forthwith was caught up by the Rector.

"Well, but what does that mean? You've let the cat out of the bag, my lady; what sort of men does 'well' include? Do the mothers think less well of those who are notoriously evil-livers? Are they less anxious to catch them for their daughters? I fear me not; however, it's a shame to stick pins into you, for at all events you are not one of those mothers who were taunted by a shining light of my cloth with toiling all night and catching nothing."

As he was speaking, Lady Rothley ran quickly over in her mind the morals of her numerous sons-in-law, bucolic, political, legal, &c., and felt a thrill of pride in her selection, as she recalled the chaste virtues of each.

It is seldom that men get an undue share of blame in these matters, but in this instance Lady Rothley had been unjust towards Lionel. However grievous his errors, his conduct towards Lady Eva had been the result of the maxims of his society, and it must be in fair-

ness added, of her own folly. He would have admitted that he was not behaving loyally to his wife, with her rigid ideas on these subjects, but as to Lady Eva, he had never wished to injure her, and according to the notions of their own set there was nothing to render an elopement necessary; indeed such an idea had never entered his head.

On Lionel's errors we will not dwell. He, at least, had possessed no exalted nôtions of right and wrong, nothing beyond the world's elastic code, while Agnes had created for herself a high ideal of virtue, unsupported by religious principles; and of these two, hers was the more dangerous position. Lionel's present frame of mind was one that appealed to George Malcolm's generous instincts. He spoke no word of reproach against the wife, who, even if he had wronged her, was also not guiltless of blame towards him. He spoke with respect of her, of her high qualities, and of her entire loyalty to himself, although he knew that she had never loved him. He intended, he said, to redeem the past manfully, and charged Malcolm with many a message of heartfelt penitence.

Could she have overheard the whole of his

conversation, the haughty Agnes might well have blushed at the contrast between her husband's estimate of her virtues and of what her conscience would have told her of her own failings, and some such thought crossed the mind even of him, who made every allowance for her faults and estimated her worth so highly.

In the final interview before Lionel sailed much passed between Malcolm and himself which was never forgotten. Seed was sown, which became a germ of hope, and bore its full measure of fruit in the future.

In consultation with the Rothleys and the Talbots about the arrangements for Agnes's future, Malcolm had devised a plan which would, they hoped, obviate the appearance of an open rupture between the Beresfords, and also secure for Agnes the rest she desired. It was well known that Lionel's debts obliged him to leave England, and that he was proceeding at once to the seat of war in India, but of those other sins laid at his door nothing positive was known; indeed, Lady Rothley's vigorous proceedings had silenced scandalous rumours as far as her niece was concerned. People might surmise and shake

their heads, but the facts were patent to all, that Lady Eva had been seen in the Park the day after she was supposed to have eloped, that she was now staying with the Rothleys, and that Lionel was proceeding to join the forces in the East. The few who cared for Agnes hoped that, her pride being saved by the avoidance of open scandal, a reconciliation between her husband and herself might in some future be brought about. While refusing to see him, she had desired that liberal arrangements should be made; above all that, at any sacrifice to herself, he should be freed from the dishonour of debt. She little imagined that these debts were, at the present, far beyond her power to liquidate, for though temporary arrangements had been made, which allowed of Lionel's starting at once, Agnes had no property to dispose of during her father's lifetime.

No mention has been made of the gentle suffering Amy, since we left her in the Rectory garden two years ago. She had improved in health, though she was still subject to violent recurrences of pain. The surgeons had hopes of a partial recovery from her spinal disease, but latterly the close air of

London during a hot summer had retarded her progress, and it was strongly urged by them that she should remove to the seaside, for the advantage of baths as well as for the renovating air. Nothing would be more likely to rouse Agnes from her morbid state of mind than the feeling that she could be of use to the poor girl. It was therefore proposed to Agnes that she should take charge of Amy, which would relieve the parents of a load of anxiety. The plan suited her well, opening as it did a prospect of peace to her fevered soul. The necessary arrangements were easily and promptly made, and in a short time they were comfortably established in a village on the northern coast of Devonshire, one of the few seaside places which are still guiltless of parades and monster hotels. It was a lovely little sequestered nook, sheltered by wooded hills teeming with flowers and luxuriant vegetation, and as it was many miles from the nearest railway station, it was uninvaded by tourists. Some modest cottages scattered about, real cottages, not glaring, white, semi-detached villas, and a country inn, kept by a worthy widow, primitive in her attire and hos-

pitable in her efforts to make the inmates comfortable, were the noteworthy attractions of the place. In one of the cottages Agnes and Amy settled themselves. The snug sitting-room had glass doors opening on to a paradise of a garden, sloping down to the sea. The maids were bright, trim, and rosy-cheeked; the linen snowy and lavender-scented; the air fresh with sea breezes and fragrant with the smell of wild flowers. Here we may leave Agnes for a time, tranquil in the companionship of one she respected, and whose influence, perchance, may soothe her restless spirit and rouse its dormant goodness, while we revert to the gentle Quakeress, and enquire how it has fared with her in the *interim*.

END OF VOL. II.